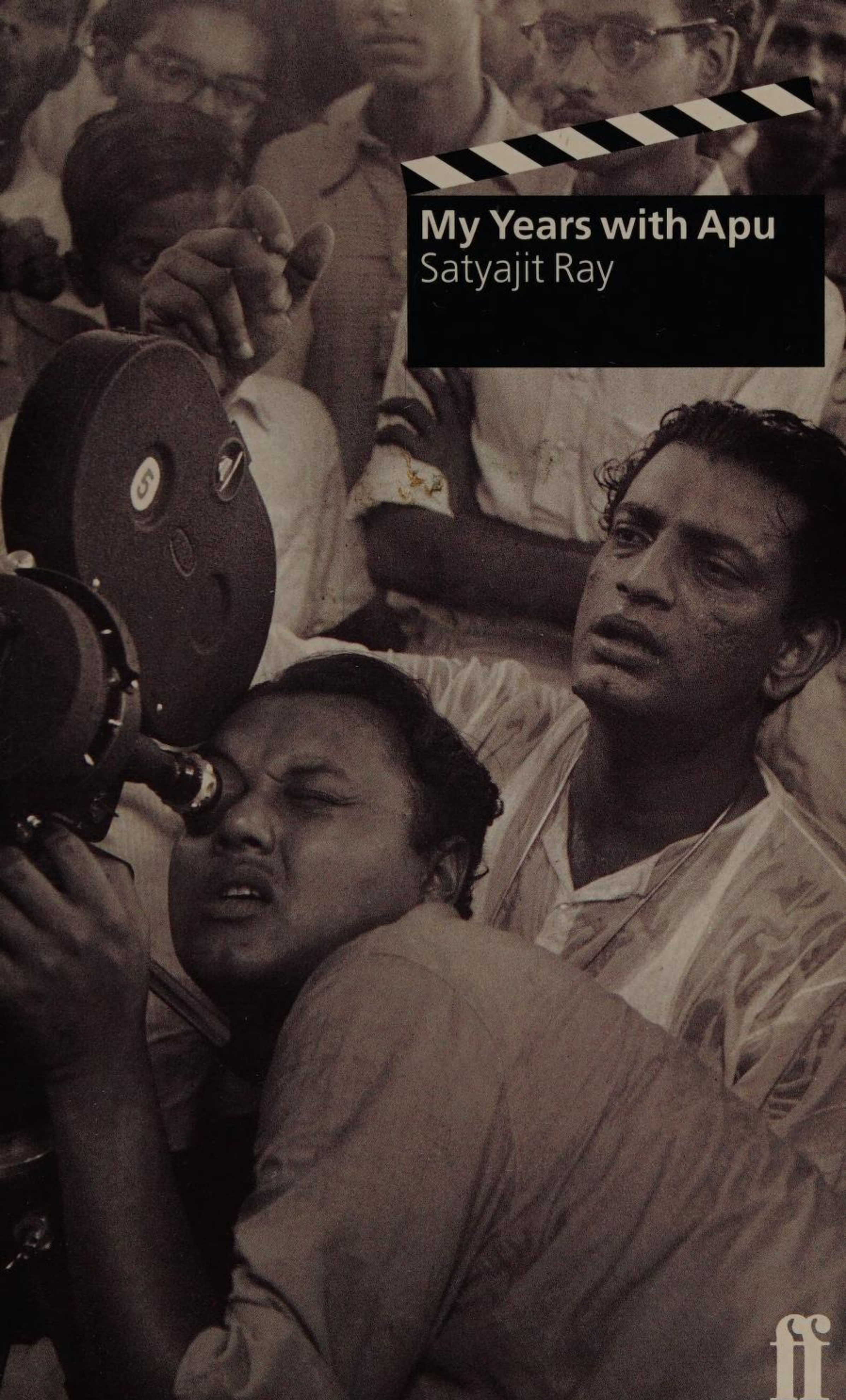

My Years with Apu

Satyajit Ray

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My Years With Apu

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Satyajit Ray

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Preface

The final draft of *My Years With Apu* was stolen when my husband was in the nursing home fighting for his life.

It was found missing when my son and daughter-in-law went into his room to sort things out about a week after his passing away. My daughter-in-law had seen him putting it on top of the table near him but it was no longer there! A frantic search went on for three nights and days. Finally, they gave up.

They didn't tell me anything about it at the time because they knew nothing would register in the state of deep anguish I was in then.

I came to know about it three months later. They had somehow managed to find the first draft, which my son handed over to me, saying, 'Ma, you are the only person who can make something out of this.'

I took one look and put it aside. I knew it would make sense to no one but my husband. How could *I* possibly decipher the indecipherable?

The draft consisted of sentences, half sentences, thoughts and ideas and incidents jotted down in such a hurry that many letters were not even properly formed! A kind of helplessness assailed me.

I took a second look and then a third and found to my

utter surprise that the thoughts, ideas and incidents were magically taking shape and beginning to make sense!

Slowly a strong determination, which I had never known I possessed, took hold of me. I sat and struggled with it for one year and eight months and was able to reconstruct it.

It breaks my heart to hand over this unfinished version of his last work to the readers. I am using the word 'unfinished' because I know he must have made copious additions, alterations, corrections and improvements to the final draft which was stolen, and the finished product would have been a joy to read in his wonderfully lucid, polished and impeccable English. We have been deprived of this treat—but still something is better than nothing and I feel happy in a way, because I have been able to contribute to making this book possible.

Calcutta *Bijoya Ray*
September 1994

One

Flashback

EVEN A YEAR before the autumn afternoon in 1952 when I started shooting *Pather Panchali* in a field of tall white *kaash* flowers, the thought of taking up film making as a career hadn't occurred to me at all. I had a safe job as the art director of a British advertising agency, with whom I had worked for nearly ten years. Although I was beginning to realize with some dismay that an advertising artist was never free, but had to conform to the whims of clients who held the purse strings, I stuck to the job as I had grown up with the notion that nothing was more desirable for a young man than financial security.

My father and grandfather had never held jobs. Grandfather Upendra Kishore was a true renaissance man, who wrote, painted, played the violin and composed songs. He was a pioneer in half-tone block making and founded a printing press which soon established itself as the finest in the country. He died in 1915 at the age of fifty-two, six years before I was born. He had sent his eldest son, Sukumar, my father, to England to study printing technology. Father stood first in the final examination at the Manchester School of Printing Technology. He returned home while grandfather was still alive, got married, and joined his father's business.

I was born in 1921, the year that Father was taken ill with what was then an incurable tropical disease called kala-azar. He was in and out of bed for two-and-a-half years, looking

after the press and contributing poems, stories and illustrations to *Sandesh*, a children's magazine which my grandfather founded, when he was comparatively well.

After Father's death, at the age of thirty-six, the press carried on for three years. Thereafter, the business changed hands and we had to leave our spacious residence in North Calcutta.

My mother and I (I was the only child) moved to my maternal uncle's house at the southern end of the city. This extreme generosity on my uncle's part literally saved us from a fate that could have been catastrophic. My uncle was still a bachelor. He worked in an insurance company and he was already providing for a younger unmarried sister but he took us into his house because he wanted to repay the help my father had given him when he was a student in the city. My mother on her part looked after the household affairs, the day-to-day expenses, and took charge of the kitchen and so on. To add to the family income she took a job teaching needlework in a widow's home, travelling to and fro by bus.

And where did cinema fit into the scheme of things?

The answer is that I became a film fan while still at school. I avidly read *Picturegoer* and *Photoplay*, neglected my studies and gorged myself on Hollywood gossip purveyed by Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. Deanna Durbin became a favourite not only because of her looks and her obvious gift as an actress, but because of her lovely soprano voice. Also firm favourites were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, all of whose films I saw several times just to learn the Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern tunes by heart.

At some point in my early college years my interest shifted from the stars to the directors. This was probably triggered by a reading of the two books on film theory by

Pudovkin. At any rate, I could clearly see that my intense interest in Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant was giving way to an interest in Ernst Lubitsch, John Ford, Frank Capra, William Wyler, George Stevens et al. At this point I chanced upon an issue of *Sight & Sound* and became a subscriber. It was a most exciting period. I had discovered a new world. When I watched a film I was no longer interested in just what the stars were doing, but was also observing how the camera was being deployed, when the cuts came, how the narrative unfolded, what were the characteristics that distinguished the work of one director from another.

Meanwhile, something else had caught my imagination and rivalled my interest in cinema. It was Western Classical music. I had grown up in an atmosphere of Indian music—particularly the songs of Tagore, as virtually everyone on my mother's side had a natural singing voice. But side by side with Tagore's songs, I heard, as a very small boy, waltzes and marches on a toy gramophone I had been given as a birthday present which came with records the size of the modern compact discs. My ear was thus attuned to Western music from a very early age.

At school, I discovered the popular classics—Dvořák's *From the New World* symphony, Tchaikovsky's piano concertos, Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*—and found I was captivated. I soon began to buy records with my pocket money. At first, I bought second hand ones from the flea market. I remember paying eight annas (about tuppence) each for black label H.M.V. records of Beethoven's *Egmont* and *Coriolan* overtures. Later I bought new records of the symphonies and concertos, but at first could afford only one movement at a time per month. It was only after I got a job

that I could afford to buy the complete works. By then Tovey's four volumes of *Essays in Musical Analysis* had become my bedside reading and I had got into the habit of listening to my records with my eyes on a miniature score.

With these two pursuits eating up my time, I began to neglect my studies. I read science the first two years, barely surviving the onslaught of sines and cosines and the rude facts of physics and chemistry.

In my third year in college, for my graduation, I decided to take up Humanities. A friend of my father's, a leading statistician, urged that I should read Economics, so that immediately after graduation I could get a job in the Indian Statistical Institute which he headed. I did as I was told, swayed by the magic word 'job' and I never ceased to regret it. I loathed the subject and only managed to graduate with second class honours through sheer cramming.

I was eighteen then and decided to give up further studies. My mother felt it was too early for me to look for a job and suggested that in the interim I should be a student of painting in Tagore's university in Santiniketan, a hundred miles from Calcutta. The Nobel Prize winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore, had been a friend and contemporary of my grandfather's and a great admirer of my father's nonsense rhymes. Tagore himself was fully conversant with every form of literary expression. In his later years he wrote a book of nonsense verse, but admitted that 'this is one field where Sukumar reigns supreme'.

I had in my mind decided to become a commercial artist. Both my grandfather and father were painters and illustrators, and I had a natural flair for drawing. I gave thought to my mother's suggestion and decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to acquire a grounding in Indian art, although

the thought of becoming a painter had no attraction for me.

So I did enroll as a student in the Arts Department in Santiniketan in 1940. It was a five-year course at the end of which you received a diploma which was useful if you wanted to take up art teaching as a profession. This I had no intention of doing, so I left after three years. But these three years were among the most fruitful of my life. I, who had been completely under the sway of the western tradition in art, admiring Rembrandt and da Vinci, was suddenly exposed to the magnificence of Oriental art. Chinese landscapes, Japanese woodcuts and Indian miniatures deeply stirred my imagination. Along with three friends, I visited the more important places of artistic interest in India. Ajanta, Ellora and Khajuraho were eye-openers. I found my stay at Santiniketan fruitful for another reason—the campus was surrounded by villages where we used to go to sketch and I, who was born and bred in the city, was exposed to the varied charms of rural Bengal for the first time.

Fortunately, my being in Santiniketan didn't mean that I was cut off from Western Classical music. A German Jew called Alex Aronson, who was Professor of English, had a collection of classical records. Most evenings were spent in his cottage, listening to chamber music on his portable H.M.V.

But for me Santiniketan had its negative aspect too. This was 1941 and the war was actually at our doorstep, yet Santiniketan continued in its placid routine. The goings on in the campus—daily prayers, music recitals, dance dramas—seemed out of tune with the times. Then there was the absence of cinema and *Citizen Kane* had come to Calcutta and I had missed it. To atone for the lack, I read books on cinema which I found in the Arts Department library—Paul

Rotha's *Film Till Now* and Raymond Spothiswoode's *Grammar of the Film*. Both the books added considerably to my knowledge of the subject. These books did not instil in me a desire to make films but rather filled me with the urge to somehow introduce a discriminating film culture among the Bengali intelligentsia, which would ultimately lead to an improvement in the quality of Bengali films, if not Indian films as a whole. I still had no idea how to go about it.

I left Santiniketan the day the Japanese bombed Calcutta, one year after the death of Tagore. I had told my teacher Nandalal Bose earlier that I had no intention of becoming a painter, so he let me leave without completing the course. He did point out that my drawing had improved enormously in the last three years and that I had become quite an adept at using the Japanese calligraphic brush. I told him I hoped to become a commercial artist and he wished me luck.

The day I arrived in Calcutta, the Japanese bombed the city for the second time. I felt I was back where the action was. Calcutta was now a transformed city, chock-a-block with khaki-clad GIs, half the local population having left in a panic. For a film buff, it was a great time, because the cinemas showed the latest Hollywood films simultaneously with their release in the States. I lapped up the films, though at the back of my mind was the thought that the time had come to look for a job.

I was still in my maternal uncle's house, now a spacious three-storey apartment that he owned in a quite prosperous middle-class locality in South Calcutta. Uncle had married soon after we moved into his house and now he had four children. Also my eldest maternal uncle had died and his widow and two daughters, Jaya and Bijoya, were now living

under the same roof as us. My mother still taught at the widow's school, and now I realized the need to add to her small income.

. I scoured the newspapers for interesting advertisements and soon noticed a family resemblance between certain ads which I discovered to be the work of a British agency called D.J. Keymer & Co. They seemed to be more enterprising than most others and also, as I soon learned, were the work of a Bengali artist. Some more probing, and it turned out that the Calcutta manager of the agency, a Bengali named D.K. Gupta, was the elder brother of someone we had known for a long time. A friend of the Gupta family called Lalit Mitter, was also a friend of my uncle's. It was Mitter who took me to see D.K. Gupta. I was introduced as the son of Sukumar Ray and Gupta's eyes lit up for a reason I was to discover later. I had taken a file of my drawings with me. Gupta glanced at them and asked me to visualize a series of six ads for an imaginary product. I came back home and sketched out six ads for a perfume, illustrating each with a brush drawing to go with the copy. I also devised the captions.

I showed them to Gupta and he asked me to come to Keymer's for an interview with the British Managing Director, Mr Broom. 'But even if you are chosen,' he warned me, 'the salary you'll be offered will break your heart.'

Mr Broom offered me Rs 65 (£ 2) per month plus a dearness allowance of Rs 15. 'But there is no ceiling if you can prove your worth,' he added.

I joined Keymer's in April 1943, four months after my return to Calcutta from Santiniketan.

The Art Director at Keymer's was a Bengali named Annada Munsi. I willingly put myself under his tutelage—for I discovered in no time at all that my three years in

Santiniketan hadn't prepared me for doing layouts for ads. The combination of caption, copy, illustration and logo was a very specialized job, which didn't necessarily follow the rules of composition that applied to painting.

Munsi was an alcoholic who reeked of gin and lime when he came in the morning, but he was extremely good at his job which made up for all his shortcomings in the eyes of Broom. Also a favourite of Broom's was D.K. Gupta to whom I owed my job. Everyone called him DK, and I started doing the same. DK had a flair for catchy captions and was looked upon as a force in advertising.

But I soon discovered that DK's real interest was in book production, and soon enough, in addition to his responsibility as one of the heads of Keymer's, he launched a publishing concern which he called Signet Press. I was roped in to design book jackets while DK himself looked after the production. The first set of books that Signet brought out created a sensation in the publishing world. My own contribution was not insignificant as I used, for the first time in books, traditional Bengali motifs on the jackets, sometimes with an illustration in brush or pen.

A very odd situation resulted from this. I worked both as an advertising artist and as a book designer sitting at the desk of Keymer's studio, under the very eyes of Mr Broom. Such latitude towards his Indian employees must have been rare in a British executive.

When it started, Signet Press specialized in books of verse. Till then books of poetry rarely went into a second edition and poets seldom received any royalty. The situation was changed by DK. The books were so well produced and published that they became bestsellers.

Within a short time DK took up prose as well and

brought out novels and collections of short stories, all designed by me. In 1944, he decided to bring out an abridged edition for young readers of a classic Bengali novel *Pather Panchali* by a writer called Bibhuti Bhusan Bannerji. I had not read the original novel. In fact, in my preoccupation with music and films, my reading was largely restricted to books on these two subjects and to light English fiction. To be quite fránk, I was even unfamiliar with the bulk of Tagore's writings. DK discovered this lacuna and castigated me. Then he gave me the original book of *Pather Panchali* to read, because, he warned me, 'you will have to illustrate the abridged version!'

The book filled me with admiration. It was plainly a masterpiece and a sort of encyclopedia of life in rural Bengal. It dealt with a Brahmin family, an indigent priest, his wife, his two children and his aged cousin, struggling to make both ends meet. The amazingly lifelike portrayals, not just of the family but of a host of other characters, the vivid details of daily existence, the warmth, the humanism, the lyricism, made the book a classic of its kind.

Next, I read the abridgement and found that it had been quite adroitly done—a book of 300 pages had been reduced to one of a hundred while retaining all the major characters and incidents. About a third of the original novel is devoted to the life of the family. After they immigrate to Benaras the story is continued in a second volume, called *Aparajito*. The abridgement ended with the family leaving for Benaras. DK was something of a film buff himself, having edited a Bengali film magazine for some years before joining Keymer's. He told me that the shortened version of *Pather Panchali* would make a very good film. I tucked this away at the back of my mind as an interesting observation and proceeded to do the illustrations.

DK now did something for which he earned my eternal gratitude. He brought out my father's two books *Abol-Tabol* (Hocus-pocus) and *Ha-ja-ba-ra-la* (Higgledy Piggledy). These two books were in print, having been published by U. Ray & Sons, the publishing press that had once belonged to us. But the present owners had never paid a single penny on these books. DK put an ad in the papers saying that Signet Press was about to publish the two books. U. Ray & Sons took no action and the Signet editions came out in due course to become immediate bestsellers. For the first time in twenty-six years I received royalties for my father's books.

Although commercial art provided me with my daily bread and butter, what really mattered was music and films. In both these pursuits, I soon discovered kindred souls. I came across an article in a literary quarterly called *Sama-Samayik* (Contemporary) in which someone calling himself 'Akela' (Alone) described at length his quest for Western Classical music. The editor of this quarterly, which had a short life of only three issues, was a highly erudite person called Nirad C. Chaudhuri. A little sleuthing revealed that 'Akela' was none other than Chaudhuri himself. I turned up at Chaudhuri's flat in South Calcutta. I was ushered by a servant into the sitting room where Chaudhuri, a small man with a butterfly moustache, sat and chatted with a friend. In a corner of the room was a gramophone with a huge horn which I recognized as an E.M.G. handmade model from an advertisement I had seen in the *Gramophone* magazine, edited by Compton Mackenzie, to which I had become a subscriber. On the wall above was a large portrait of Winston Churchill and on another wall a framed Medici print of *Mona Lisa*. I introduced myself and mentioned that I had read the article he had written under an assumed name and that I had

been bitten by the same bug. 'So I am not alone!' he chirped.

I stayed for an hour or so while Chaudhuri played some music on his gramophone, using bamboo needles. Among the works he played was a Haydn Quartet during which his eight-year-old son strayed into the room. 'Daddy, is that Opus one, Number one?' he asked. He was, of course, right.

I asked Chaudhuri's permission to drop in occasionally to listen to his records. 'Come any evening you like,' he said. Later, reading his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, I discovered that he was living a hand-to-mouth existence. When I met him, though, neither the look of his room—the bookshelves spilling over with rare volumes, the records stacked neatly by the gramophone—nor his affability, or his plethora of offspring revealed this.

Another kindred soul, though much younger this time—was Norman Clare. Norman was in the intelligence branch of the Royal Air Force, stationed in Calcutta. We met and being on the same wavelength, soon struck up a friendship. We spent long hours playing chess and listening to music until his departure after the war.

I had also discovered like-minded film buffs to keep me company when I went—as I did almost as a rule—to a movie on a Saturday afternoon. The most important of these was surely my future art director, Bansi Chandra Gupta. Those days I used to go occasionally to the United States Information Service library, particularly to read the latest issue of *Theatre Arts*. It was there that I met Bansi. His shoulder-length hair first led me to suspect that he was a dancer. As it turned out, he was a painter, arrived here in 1943 from Kashmir. He was now a member of the Calcutta Group. He was a good painter although in those days painting wasn't synonymous with an authorized income as it is now. In fact,

Bansi had come prepared to struggle, led a spartan existence in a one-room flat bereft of furniture and ate out in a small restaurant in the neighbourood. Films were a passion with him as much as they were with me and we hit it off splendidly right from the start. We both heartily disliked the home-made product and felt equally strongly that something had to be done about it.

*

Three events, two of international significance and the third of a purely personal nature took place in 1947. India became independent, Gandhi was killed by a fanatic's bullet at the beginning of the New Year, and the Calcutta Film Society was born. The last was one of the first steps towards a discriminating film culture, the idea for which had crossed my mind in Santiniketan. We had first thought of calling it Calcutta Film Club, but CFC also stood for one of the two football clubs still surviving in Calcutta. So we finally settled for Calcutta Film Society. Bansi Chandra Gupta was, of course, one of the founder members. But there were others whom I had succeeded in drawing into the circle. Chidananda Das Gupta had spent his early years in Hazaribagh, a town in Bihar. None of the two or three cinemas in the town showed foreign films. As a result Chidananda had yet to see a film by Chaplin. He was now settled in Calcutta and teaching English in a college. I got to know him and he responded enthusiastically as I expatiated on the thrills and delights of movie going. This in turn infected two of Das Gupta's classmates, one of whom, Manoj Majumdar, had a signal role to play when I decided to make *Pather Panchali*.

We launched our club with a total membership of twenty-five. What we lacked in manpower, we made up for in our enthusiasm. We had private 16 mm screenings—usually in the sitting rooms of our houses. We discussed various aspects of the cinema, handed our members tickets for public screenings of films which we felt deserved to be seen and discussed.

The very first screening, as I recall, was of Sergei Eisenstein's classic *Battleship Potemkin*. The print was obtained from the British Film Institute on the understanding that we would pay for it as soon as we had the funds—that time never came, and the B.F.I. was generous enough never to take action against us. Around this time I wrote my first article on cinema. It was called 'What is wrong with the Indian Films' and it was published in the *Statesman*, the leading Calcutta English daily. Among other things, I said:

It should be realized that the average American film is a bad model because it depicts a way of life which is utterly at variance with our own. Moreover the high technical polish which is the hallmark of the standard Hollywood product would be impossible to achieve under existing Indian conditions. What Indian Cinema needs today is not more gloss, but more imagination, more integrity, and more intelligent appreciation of the limitations of the medium.

After all, we do possess the primary tools of film making. The complaint of the technicians notwithstanding, mechanical devices, such as the crane shot and the process shot are useful, but by no

means indispensable. In fact, what tools we have, have been used on occasion with real intelligence. What our cinema needs above everything else is a style, an idiom, a part of the iconography of cinema which would be uniquely and recognizably Indian.

*

One of the most dramatic events in my life was meeting Jean Renoir. This was in 1949 when he came to Calcutta to scout locations and interview actors for *The River*.

Opening the *Statesman* one morning, a couple of lines in the 'personals' column transfixed me. It said Jean Renoir was staying at the Great Eastern Hotel and would be interviewing actors for an English language film to be shot in India. The Great Eastern was five minutes' walk from my office. I lost no time in turning up at the hotel and introducing myself to Renoir as one of his ardent admirers. Actually I knew only his Hollywood films at that time, *The Southerner* being a special favourite. This was the film that first brought home to me that characters in a film needn't be black or white, but could also be grey. It also taught me the importance of shooting in and around locations rather than artificial studio sets meant to represent exteriors.

Renoir received me cordially and expressed surprise that an Indian should know so much about his life and works. He had come with his Brazilian wife Dido, his long time French art director, Eugene Lourié and the camera man, Clyde Devine. They had come for a month, would go back and return for shooting the following year. As I later wrote in an article for the British film magazine *Sequence*: 'Renoir was

so embarrassingly polite and modest that I felt if I were not too careful, I would find myself discoursing upon the Future of the Cinema for his benefit!'

I had the great good fortune to accompany Renoir—only on weekends, though, because of my job—on his trips to the outskirts of Calcutta, scouting for locations. I used the long journeys to pester him with questions about his films, French and American, and he always answered patiently and elaborately. It was from him that I learnt that he had shot on location long before *The Moralists* and that he had used deep focus in *La Règle du Jeu* at least two years before Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. What really fascinated me was his way of looking at things—landscapes, people, houses and a hut, clustering banana trees by a pond with water hyacinths in them. The 'aahs' and 'oohs' that punctuated his words were always in response to something seen with a great painter's eyes. For me too, his responses were eye-openers. Also, undoubtedly, it was Renoir who planted the idea of making a film in my mind. He actually asked me if I were interested in becoming a film maker. I found myself saying 'yes'. 'Have you found a subject?'—he asked. I gave him a brief outline of *Pather Panchali*, the idea of making a film of which had in the meantime taken hold of me. As I drove through the countryside with Renoir, it had been occupying my mind—not the entire novel, but the abridged version, which seemed to correspond more to a film script. Renoir encouraged me. I had taken him to see a few Bengali films and he had requested me not to borrow from American films. 'You can turn aside from the Hollywood world.'

Before he went back to Hollywood, Renoir gave me a photograph of his which said at the back: 'To Manik Ray. I look forward to seeing him as a married man. Jean Renoir.'

I had just married my cousin, the youngest daughter of my eldest maternal uncle, who lived in the same house and who shared the same taste in films and music as I. Although an unconventional marriage, my mother accepted it without demur. I was earning enough to be able to afford a flat of my own. Even before marriage, we had moved to a flat, but this was not large enough for a married man. So, shortly thereafter, we moved a second time. This was further south and within walking distance of my uncle's house.

By now I had found yet another occupation. I had begun writing film scripts, just for the fun of it. I still didn't realize that it was the prelude to my giving up my job and taking up film as a profession; I suppose I should thank the obtuseness of clients for the rejection of some fine advertising campaigns which had begun to irk me a great deal.

I had acquired a new hardcover copy of John Gassner and Dudley Nichols' *20 Best Film Plays*, which I studied assiduously. The films which I already knew came alive as I read the scripts. The professionalism of the scripts was beyond doubt and of great value to me and I began to wonder why at least fifty per cent of the credit for the films was not given to the screenwriter. *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* was surely as much a Frank Capra film as a Sidney Buchman one. At any rate, without any thought of turning any of them into a film, I wrote script after script.

Usually I would take a story or novel which had been announced as being under production. I would write my own treatment and compare it with the result on the screen. I would even go to the length of preparing a second version which I surmised would be a better one compared to the version on the screen. More often than not, I was proved right.

At this point I got involved in another film project. I was to write the screenplay and my friend Harisadhan Das Gupta, who had studied at the University of Southern California, was to direct it. The property which Das Gupta had acquired for Rs 20,000 was Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*. Das Gupta had found a producer, one Mr Majumdar, a businessman, and I was invited to read the screenplay to him. This was duly done and Mr Majumdar made all the right noises to say that it had gone down very well. An agreement was signed, I was to get Rs 2,000 as the script writer and Das Gupta was to get an equal amount for direction. We also had a Tagorian cast and were about to commence shooting when Majumdar announced that he was anxious to get a second opinion about the script from a friend whose judgement he valued. The friend happened to be a leading specialist in venereal diseases.

I read the script again in the presence of the doctor. The doctor suggested some changes which were endorsed by Majumdar. I said I'd see what I could do about it. Das Gupta was anxious that I should make the changes so that the production could get under way. On my part, I was adamant about sticking to my treatment, as anything else would hurt my youthful pride. The upshot was that the project fell through. An estrangement resulted between Das Gupta and myself and he didn't speak to me for over a year. As for me, I realize today that it was providential that the film was never made. Thirty-five years later, when I made *The Home and the World*, I had a look at my original script and I realized it was an amateurish, Hollywoodish effort which would have ruined our reputation and put an end to whatever thoughts I might have had about a film career.

At about this time I came across a short story by a major

leftist writer called Manik Bannerji. It was about an English manager of a zamindar's estate and described how a spirited youth takes a stand against the manager's exploitation of poor peasants. In my judgement, such as it was at that time, I thought the subject was a great one and in a moment of recklessness set about looking for a sponsor for the project and then decided to direct the film myself. With the help of a well-wisher a sponsor was found—the owner of a Bengali business firm called Büher & Co. (yes, the umlaut was there). The owner's name was not Büher—there is no such name in Bengali, but Bose.

I was summoned accordingly to his house to read out the script to him. A fat squat man sat at the head of a long conference table. I occupied a chair close enough to him to avoid pitching my voice too high. On my right sat the leading professional script writer of the day, a spruce man dressed in spotless white dhoti and kurta, a white tin of Player's Number 3 cigarettes on the table in front of him. On my left sat a leading director of Bengali films. Both the gentlemen I knew by sight. Mr Bose saw no reason to introduce them to me and I was asked to commence my reading. An outline of the script was written on loose sheets of paper which were pinned together. I knew I would be able to fill in the gaps from memory.

Before I had the chance to begin, the director tapped me on the shoulder and asked, 'Have you counted how many climaxes there are in your treatment?' I said I hadn't, but he was free to do so himself while I read the script. This didn't seem to please the director. He was obviously a believer in numbers and the climaxes had to be confined to a certain figure in order to ensure that the script would work.

However, I started reading the script. The director kept

peering over my shoulder at my notes and interrupted me several times in the middle by asking, 'I see your script mentions fade-outs and dissolves. I hope you know what they mean?' I didn't condescend to reply but went on reading after an impatient pause.

The film ended in a scene where the youth confronts a cowering manager, who had suffered a previous tactical defeat—the youth makes a short speech and the script ends with the erstwhile rumbustious manager silenced in defeat.

'But you must make the young man say "Quit India",' was the first remark Bose made as I concluded my recital. 'Quit India' was a slogan which Gandhi derived for the political movement of August 1942 when the British were asked to grant immediate independence or force the Congress into a mass movement of civil disobedience.

'Yes, "Quit India",' repeated Mr Bose. 'The young man must say "Quit India".' I was at the point of asking what would happen if he didn't, but I thought better of it and left asking for time to think. That was the last I saw of Mr Büher Bose.

Renoir came back with his crew the next year to start shooting. My friend Bansi, who had already worked as an Art Director in a couple of Bengali films, was appointed Art Director of *The River* under Lourié, who undertook to be the Production Designer. Harisadhan Das Gupta was taken on as an assistant of Renoir. I was given a copy of the script to read which Renoir had written in Hollywood in collaboration with Rumer Godden, the writer of the novel.

I would have given my right arm for a chance to watch the shooting regularly, but I was now the Art Director of my company (jointly with an import firm from England) and could go only on a couple of weekends—Bansi came over every evening after the shooting and filled me in on details

of Renoir's working methods which I took in avidly.

However, this couldn't go on for very long. Broom had hinted earlier that he had in mind to send me to London to work for a while in the head office of Keymer's. He now announced that all plans were ready. My wife and I would go by boat in April 1950 and spend five months in London and a month on the Continent in places of our choice. Renoir or no Renoir, this was an opportunity I could scarcely let slip. It would mean the opportunity to see all the classics of European cinema which never came my way. It would mean looking up the editors of *Sequence,* a brand new film monthly which was the brainchild of three youngsters, Gavin Lambert, Lindsay Anderson and Peter Ericsson. It would also mean live concerts instead of gramophone records and the best thing the English plays had to offer. I had read about the three editors and soon saw their picture in an issue of *Vogue* magazine in the 'People are Talking About' section. I sent in my subscription immediately and when the first issue arrived I found it was just my cup of tea. Later I wrote to the Chief Editor Lambert, asking if they would accept an article on Renoir in Calcutta written by me. The answer came from Lindsay Anderson, who it turned out, had links with India. His brother was settled in India and Lindsay himself was born in Bangalore, though he left India at the age of about three. Anyway, *Sequence* immediately accepted and published my article and I looked forward to meeting the trio.

One week before my twenty-ninth birthday, my wife and I left with bag and baggage by train for Colombo, where we would catch the P & O liner *Maloja* to take us to London.

It took us sixteen days to reach London. Sixteen days whose charm I still find very difficult to describe to those who have travelled only by plane. The first thrill was being

addressed as 'Sir' by English deckhands and waiters. But there was also 'Housie, Housie', deck quoits, table tennis, fancy dress balls, standing in queues for ice cream, watching first run Hollywood movies and just lounging. I knew there would be plenty of time so I had taken a notebook in which I jotted down ideas for a film of *Pather Panchali*. I had discussed the idea with friends and relations. Bansi was most excited. Being a Kashmiri he had no access to the book, but I had described to him the highlights, the first sight of the train, the death of old auntie, the stolen necklace, the rain and the storm and the death of Durga. He was convinced that it would make a wonderful film. 'Perhaps you can take leave from your work and make it and then go back to your work again,' he said. I had more or less decided as to the method of approach. Mostly non-actors, no make-up, shooting on locations . . . . I now described the approach to him, just to get a feedback. The reaction was amazing. 'You can't make a film like that. Non-pros will muff their lines, on locations you have no control over the lights, you can't shoot, moreover in the dull light of a rainy day . . . .' I was convinced it was such notions that made our films look phony.

We reached Portsmouth on a week day, from where we took the train to Hampstead. Norman Clare, who was a great friend of ours, had arranged for us to stay with his mother as paying guests. We occupied the third floor of a three-storied house on Willoughby Road, where you had only to take a few steps to find yourself on the heath. The other occupants in the house were an office-going girl, an old couple and Norman's widowed mother with her pet Labrador, Brika. Norman himself lived with his wife June in a flat near Regents Park. Life soon fell into a groove, although it took some time to get over the shock of discovering that the head

office of Keymer's was a third in size of the Calcutta office and only had a tiny studio where a few Indian artists worked, including the Art Director Ball, whose very offensive bowler hat and rolled umbrella raised my hackles. It was difficult to imagine an artist who looked more like a banker. In fact, he would probably have fared better as a banker, because he produced shockingly bad lay-outs. It was quite apparent that there was nothing I could learn from our London office, although I could teach a thing or two.

Apart from being a bad artist, Bull was a haughty and insensitive person, who deliberately treated me in an off-hand fashion. I overheard a phone call he was making from the adjoining room and was shocked to discover that he was trying to pass off one of my designs—a poster for the *Observer*—as his own. There followed a showdown with Bull, and I walked out of Keymer's. I wrote immediately to Broom suggesting that I work at Benson's, a big reputable agency with affiliation to Keymer's. Broom wired back to say that I could do as I wished and that he had already fixed it up with Benson's. I saw the Art Director at Benson's with some of my work and he fixed up a desk in the same room where their leading artist John worked. John and I soon became friends and the illustration work that I did in Calcutta after my return from London clearly showed his influence.

I got in touch with Lindsay and Gavin of *Sequence* and soon we were spending evenings talking about films in their Hanover Terrace Mews. Somehow I never met Peter Ericsson, although I did meet Penelope Houston who was also on the editorial staff of *Sequence*. At a party at Lindsay's I met a host of film people including a critic I admired, Catherine de la Roche and director Thorold Dickinson, whose film *The Queen of Spades* had made a big impression on me.

In the six months that we spent abroad, we saw ninety-nine films. The very first trip was the most memorable one. Along with Norman and June we saw a double bill at the Curzon Cinema, Mayfair—*A Night at the Opera* and *Bicycle Thief*. I don't recall ever spending a more joyous or fruitful evening in the cinema. *A Night at the Opera* I had seen before. It proved even funnier the second time around. The real impact came, however, from *Bicycle Thief*. Opportunely I had found a wonderful film, moving beyond words, but wonder of wonders, de Sica was doing just the things I wanted to do in my own film and succeeding beyond measure. Who said you couldn't use non-actors? Who said you couldn't shoot in the rains? Who said you had to use make-up? And who said slickness was a criteria? I had heard that *Bicycle Thief* had been shot with poor quality negative stock, as better material was unavailable in postwar Italy. And yet the flow of the narrative was so smooth, the editing so dextrous that the quality of the stock didn't matter at all. In fact, perhaps the graininess enhanced the picture of poverty de Sica so sensitively painted.

Later, we also saw the French films of Renoir which consolidated my admiration for him, but the proof that I sought was there in *Bicycle Thief*.

We spent a month touring the Continent, a week each in Paris, Venice, Lucerne and Salzburg, the last two for the music festivals, gorging ourselves with the very best that Europe had to offer.

Returning to London, we boarded the brand new liner *Chusan* whose maiden voyage it was. On the boat, on the way back, I completed my treatment of *Pather Panchali*.

Two

Birth Pangs

THERE WAS NO doubt that I had benefitted from my stint at Benson's. I produced, as I mentioned before, some of my best advertising campaigns after my return from England. However, in my mind, a modulation from a minor to a major key had already taken place. I had served an employer long enough, now I wished to be my own master, working in a different medium with different tools. I was familiar with the camera, possessing a second hand Leica. And paying homage to a photographer I considered to be the greatest of them all—Henri Cartier-Bresson—I wanted my film to look as if it was shot with available light à la Cartier-Bresson.

Renoir had left after finishing his film and Bansi was all the richer for the experience and itching like me to do something worthwhile. The film society had grown a little and soon after my return we started to bring out a bulletin which I designed. While in London I had attended a retrospective of neo-Italian films and I wrote about it in the bulletin. It was in the air that an International Film Festival under official sponsorship was soon to take place and our bulletin front billed a list of foreign films which we felt should be acquired for the festival.

For once, a rumour turned out to be true. The festival, which spawned many a new film buff, travelled to all the major cities in India, and for a fortnight had us madly rushing

from one cinema to another to see four pictures a day on an average.

Surely one of the richest festivals ever to take place, this one included Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, de Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, Tatis' *Jour de Fete*, Rossellini's *Open City* and several other films by major directors. The biggest impact on me was made by *Rashomon*. I knew of the success it had had in Venice the previous year, but one had to see it to discover the film's intensity. If it told us anything it was that Japan had been making highly sophisticated films for a very long time.

At the end of the festival I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that I would become a film maker, starting my career with *Pather Panchali*. If it didn't work, I could get back to my desk at Keymer's, tail between my legs. But if it did work, there would be no stopping me. The question was how to go about it. The time hadn't come when I could discuss the situation with Broom and whoever was to succeed him. (I had heard that Broom would leave shortly.)

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There was never a fully developed screenplay of *Pather Panchali*, only a sheaf of notes and sketches. If it came to relating the story in the shape it would take as a film, I knew I didn't need a dossier, because I knew the whole story by heart. As I've said before, the substance of the screenplay corresponded fairly closely to DK's abridgement and literally hundreds of characters had been dropped from the original book. It remained essentially the story of the indigent Brahmin priest, Harihar Roy, and his family consisting of his

wife Sarbajaya, their daughter Durga and son Apu and an old bent cousin Indir Thakrun, Pishi to the children. I shuffled around the incidents a bit, reducing the somewhat formless rambling quality of the original and giving it a new texture. I also made auntie live much longer in my treatment because I knew that her sudden exit would disappoint the audience. In the original she dies shortly after Apu is born, but in my treatment she dies when Durga is about ten or eleven years old. This needed a genuine scene when Apu and Durga discover her dead body in a bamboo grove—the children's first encounter with death.

An important change I had made was around the death of Durga. In the woods, Durga dances with joy in the monsoon rain and dies from what is formally known as pneumonia, although in the original this is not shown as an after-effect of her getting drenched in the downpour. I made her fall ill after the rainstorm scene in the woods—the lyrical dance in the rain is shown to be a distinct cause of her death. My treatment ended slowly after Durga's death, with the family's departure to Benaras.

I knew that *Pather Panchali* would have a very different look from the usual Bengali films, so I decided to draw fairly elaborate sketches which would normally describe the film in sequence like a storyboard. This I did and then realized that even before finding a backer, I would have to obtain the film rights to the novel. To my great dismay, the author Bibhuti Bhusan Bannerji died rather suddenly after my return from abroad—so I would have to talk to the widow.

Those who backed me on my project were a handful of young film buffs. It is important to mention that my wife shared my faith in the subject and my treatment of it, while my mother objected strongly saying that I was contemplating

throwing up a sure source of income, which had increased by leaps and bounds. No one on our side of the family had ever pursued such a foolhardy course. The younger men who supported me consisted of Bansi Chandra Gupta, and twenty-year-old Subrata Mitra, who had ambitions to become a cameraman and with that in view had watched Claude Renoir's work on *The River* with the permission of Renoir himself. Then there was a young writer called Ashish Burman who was in business supplying sandwiches to executives at lunchtime. This brought him to Keymer's every afternoon, where he shared my dreams. Needless to say, the founder members of the Calcutta Film Society eagerly lent moral support and looked forward to the day when the event would take place. I must add that DK too was one who supported me, although he insisted on obtaining an assurance from me that if film making meant my severing my connection with Keymer's, the same would not happen with Signet Press.

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Bibhuti Bhusan Bannerji who wrote about all kinds of moods, at least a few of which were outstanding, had led a life of hardship, ending up as a school teacher after doing odd jobs in various parts of the country. Brahmin by birth, his father had been a priest like Apu's in *Pather Panchali*. He had married early, but had lost his wife within a year. Heartbroken, he had remained a widower for twenty-five years before marrying a second time.

It was his widow, Mrs Rama Bannerji, whom I approached for the film rights to *Pather Panchali*. Mrs

Bannerji turned out to be a great admirer not only of the illustrations I had done for the short version of *Pather Panchali*, but also of the writings of my father and grandfather. She received us most graciously and assured me there would be no problems about my getting the film rights, when we had money to launch our production. Mrs Bannerji's brother, Chandidas Chatterji, asked me to keep him informed of developments. This done, I at last started looking for a sponsor.

The first person I approached was Mr B.N. Sirkar, a sort of Bengali Louis B. Mayer, a true producer in the Hollywood sense. He owned a studio and a lab, New Theatres, and had on his payroll most of the leading actors and directors of Bengali cinema. Mr Sircar's halcyon days were past, but he was still a man to be reckoned with. I went to see him in his office with my sketchbook. A perfect gentleman, Mr Sircar received me cordially, gave full attention to what I had to say, then he said he was extremely sorry, but he had just launched a big production and wasn't in a position to help me in any way. Then he clapped my shoulders affectionately and asked me to come back after six months—the next time, of course, he would try to help me.

Next I approached another solvent producer—one Mr Bhattacharya of Kalpana Movies. He heard my recital, glanced at my sketches and said he was interested. Would I give him ten days to make up his mind? I thought I saw a silver lining and left with a promise to call back within ten days. Three days later Bibhuti Bhusan's brother-in-law Chandidas Chatterji got in touch with me. He said he was facing a dilemma. One Mr Bhattacharya of Kalpana Movies had been to see Mrs Bannerji to negotiate for the film rights of *Pather Panchali* to be directed by the veteran director

Debaki Bose. 'What did Mrs Bannerji tell him?' I asked anxiously. 'She said she had made up her mind that Satyajit Ray would direct the film and she was not prepared to consider any alternatives.' So Bhattacharya had to be discarded. This second disappointment was followed by a third one when a diabetic producer came to my house to listen to my treatment and interrupted my recital three times to visit the toilet. He liked the treatment but lacked the sense to sponsor something that was so drastically offbeat.

I had begun to feel uncertain after these experiences, when one day, Ashish Burman, the writer-caterer friend of mine told me that someone called Anil Choudhury, who was helping him with the catering business, knew a young producer who had just launched a new film and who might be persuaded to back me.

I met Anil Choudhury who turned out to be about the same age as me and who seemed to have his wits about him. Choudhury took me to see his friend, the producer, who was staying in a somewhat seedy hotel in the heart of Central Calcutta.

Choudhury was visibly excited by the script, although Das, the producer, proved noncommittal. But as Das told Choudhury later, he was willing to put up the money if a film produced by him (which had just been released) proved lucrative. As it turned out, it didn't. In fact it was a resounding flop and Das expressed his inability to put up the money for my film. Choudhury, however, stayed on to strengthen the small band that still stood behind me patiently.

The early setbacks notwithstanding, my fund of optimism was inexhaustible. While waiting for a backer, I gave my mind to the business of casting. The roles needed non-professional artists, but I knew some roles demanded a

certain professional ability, roles such as the parents' and old auntie's. *Bicycle Thief* had only one professional in it, the actress who played the soothsayer. For the mother, Sarbajaya, I had in mind the wife of a friend of mine, who had done some work on the stage. She was not a rural type at all, being a graduate with a sophisticated urban background. However, I felt she was physically right for the part, and given the right clothes to wear, the right sort of business to perform and the right lines to speak, she would be all right. For the father, we had a professional stage and film actor, Kanu Bannerji, who, I thought, would be just right for the part. I started next by looking around for the children—a boy of about six and a girl of twelve or so. There are no coaching schools for movies in India, where you can find albums of photographs to make your choice from. There are two obvious ways to look for children. One is to look in schools, and the other is to put an ad in the paper. The first proved abortive in the case of Apu. We put an advertisement asking the parents to bring their six to seven year old sons to a particular address at a particular time. The boy had to be fair, good looking, with a natural flair for acting. There was no suitable place for an interview in our somewhat small flat and a large room was acquired through the help of a student, a boy, who shared my love for films and western music.

There was a huge response to our ad, but most of them, including a girl who had come straight from the barber with her hair cut short and powder at the base of her neck, had to be rejected at sight. I felt a feeling of depression slowly creeping over me for the first time. Then my wife found Apu in the playground of the flat adjacent to ours. The boy was playing with his elder brother and friends when he was spied by my wife. Yes, she was right, physically he certainly had all the attributes.

Subir Bannerji was the name of the boy. Didn't he go to school? Yes. Had he done any acting or reciting on stage? No. How did he react to the idea of appearing in a film in a principal role? He didn't seem to have any opinion of his own but said if his parents told him to he would agree to it. 'I'll do what my mother tells me.'

The finding of Durga proved just as tough until one day Ashish Burman brought hope. He had been to a girls' school where he knew one of the teachers and had spotted a girl, who, he thought, could be perfect for Durga.

Burman was right. We made enquiries and it turned out that the girl's father was an ex-tootballer. He had heard of my reputation as a book designer and desired to see me at his house on a Sunday morning. I turned up, chatted with the parents, had a cup of tea and selected their youngest daughter Uma Dasgupta on the spot to play Durga, when and if the film was made. I had taken my Leica with me and took her up to the roof to take some pictures. Since she seemed to be a bit demure, and Durga was a tomboy, I asked her to make faces for the camera. She obliged me with a total lack of inhibition.

With Apu and Durga in the can, I felt I would take a little time over old auntie. If I found a sponsor I could well do some shooting with the children. There were lots of scenes with just the two of them.

We had budgeted the film at Rs 70,000, but even the low amount seemed ambitious to run-of-the-mill producers. 'Since you are not using any stars, any songs, any fights, can't you get it slightly lower?'

After a point, I had what seemed a fantastic idea. We would shoot the film in 16 mm and then blow it up to 35mm for theatrical release. The cost would definitely be reduced by half. Why not give it a trial?

With mounting excitement, we borrowed a Bolex from a friend, bought some negative stock and went to a village to take some test shots. I was accompanied by young Subrata Mitra who had studied Claude Renoir's methods, who I decided, would photograph my film. When I put the suggestion to him he hemmed and hawed. 'Nonsense,' I admonished. 'If you know still photography, and you do, shooting a movie on location is only a step away. You measure your light with a meter, expose your lens and your aperture and shoot. The mysteries of camerawork the professional cameraman talks about are all balderdash!'

The village we chose was Gopalnagar, where Bannerji was born and grew up. It served as the setting for the mood; he had renamed the village Nischindipur in the book. It was mid-monsoon, we had to make our way through knee-deep mud, wash our legs in a pond and then proceed with the photography. I operated the camera myself, deliberately shooting in weak light in bamboo groves, in a courtyard when it was raining. We also shot details—lotus leaves stirring in a breeze, the surface of a pond where raindrops fell, swaying plantain leaves in the wood and so on.

The processed footage looked excellent in 16 mm. Everything had come out exactly as I had imagined. The next step was the blow up of the footage for which there was no facility in Calcutta. The footage had to be sent to a lab in Bombay. When it came back we found that the thing hadn't worked at all. What was shot at a speed of twenty-four frames per second, now seemed more like thirty, with the result that the speed became distorted. We questioned the lab and they said that was the best they could do. We were now back to square one.

Meanwhile, Anil Choudhury had contacted a few new producers and drawn a blank. It became more clear to me that unless we could prove our bonafides by producing some actual footage, the credibility gap would widen. After all, none of us had any experience. Why did we expect that the producers would share our confidence without first convincing themselves that we had the knowhow? What was needed was actual film footage featuring the two children. I now realized that I had a personal source of funds, my insurance policy. I enquired and learnt that I could get Rs 7,000 against the policy. With that we could buy raw stock and hire a camera. I also approached some of my friends and relatives, those more affluent than us and asked each for a loan of a thousand rupees. They were, of course, told that they would be paid back as soon as we had a sponsor. Everyone we approached had faith in us and was convinced that this could be made to work. In all, we collected 17,000 rupees. One roll of Kodak black and white negative then cost about Rs 1,200 so we could definitely shoot for a week before our funds ran out. I decided to start with the usual highlight of the film calling for no dialogues, as we couldn't afford a sound recordist. The scene we chose was of the two children's first sight of the railway train. I had conceived the scene taking place in a large field of white fluffy *kaash* flowers to contrast with the black smoke of the train. *Kaash* was a flower which bloomed in autumn and had a life of about a couple of months. We enquired and learnt that there was a train sixty-five miles from Calcutta whose railway line ran alongside a large expanse of *kaash*. It would be the perfect setting for us.

We had the money to pay the two children. Durga, I had little doubt, would perform well, but I was not so sure about

the boy. However, I was prepared to make the effort to get the exact results from him.

For the camera we approached a private photographic studio that had a 36 mm imported Wall movie camera as against the more orthodox Mitchell which the film studios employed. We obtained the Wall at a minimum rate, the studio photographer being a friend called Asit Sen, who later became a film maker himself. He also happened to be a member of our film society.

I hadn't reached the point yet when I would discuss the matter with my manager at Keymer's (Broom had left and had been replaced by Kenneth Day). We decided we would work on a Sunday, or, if it came to that, on two or three successive Sundays.

On Sunday, 27 October 1952, which happened to be my wife's birthday, we set out for our location with the camera crew and the two children Uma Dasgupta and Subir Bannerji. We arrived around midday and after a quick lunch got down to the job of shooting. As the sun climbs, Apu and Durga have a quarrel, Durga sticks out her tongue at her brother and runs away, Apu pursuing, anxious to make it up with Didi (elder sister). They arrive at the field of *kaash* flowers, and are stopped short by the inspiring sight of a telegraph pole. Durga applies her ears to it and hears a mysterious hum. Apu does likewise. Durga slips away and settles down to chew at a stub of sugar cane which she has wrenched off on the way. Apu reaches Didi, now prepared to make his peace. At this point she is the first to hear the rumbling sound of an approaching railway train. They are thrilled by their first encounter with the mighty metal monster whose sound they hear every evening from their cottage.

On this first day, what I had planned to shoot was the

business at the telegraph pole—Apu losing sight of Durga amidst the dense tall flowers and then finding her again.

We didn't have a proper crew apart from Bansi who helped in every department. Anil Choudhury who was Production Controller (he remains so to this day) and Ashish Burman were my sole appointed crew along with Subrata Mitra, the cameraman—with the camera came Asit Sen, more to provide moral support than anything else.

The first set-up had Apu walking through the field of *kaash*, calling out to his sister whom he had lost sight of temporarily. Bansi had reminded me that I had to shout 'action' and 'cut' when they were called for.

Subrata Mitra applied his eye to the viewfinder of the Wall, Choudhury held up the clapstick—yes, we had prepared a temporary one—Apu took his position in front of the camera, the camera rolled and I shouted 'action'.

What this produced was a stiff zombie-like walk from Apu which had no relationship with the kind of walk called for. I had told him that he was to walk, stop, turn his head this way and that, start looking for his sister and then walk again. This had had no effect on the walk that now took place to greet my eyes and which the camera photographed using expensive raw stock. 'Say "cut" if you are not happy,' urged Bansi. I did so with considerable force.

I had learnt a lesson. All my preparations over the years, the transcribing by hand of notes on cutting takes while watching a film, the arduous reading of Pudovkin, Eisenstein, Rotha, Spothiswoode, my open disdain for the home-grown product, all these had finally produced was this one shot of which it was difficult to imagine anything more lifeless and futile. I must say, though, that it didn't take me long to decide that the thing could be rectified. I had simply

had no idea that it was so difficult to make a single action like a boy's walk appear convincing to the eye. What I now did was to provide mechanical aids to the boy. I planted Anil, Bansi and Ashish behind clumps of *kaash* in various positions at varying distances from each other. They were asked to call out 'Subir' at certain intervals and Subir was to react to each call by turning his head in the direction it came from, though never stopping his walk. Then I put twigs on the path at irregular intervals for him to step across.

A second take was arranged. The three assistants called out as instructed, Subir reacted every time by turning his head—this would appear on the screen as if he was looking for Durga—while he walked irresolutely forward stepping on the twigs. It was perfect and I could shout 'Eureka' for the discovery I had made about handling a child who was emphatically not a born actor. Throughout the shooting of *Pather Panchali* I had to use devices like this to get the right expression. Fortunately Subir looked exactly right for the part, otherwise it would have been a disaster.

We shot about a third of what I had envisaged and the scene came out first class. We had enough funds and film stock left to shoot over the next two Sundays.

Meanwhile, the negative was developed and printed. We saw the rushes in a lab in the southern extremity of Calcutta. We found the footage quite satisfactory. Since we had no shooting till Sunday, I was anxious to cut it in the meantime. Bansi had introduced an editor to me called Dulal Dutt, whose experience consisted of editing one feature film, but who had worked as an amateur on a number of films (Dutt is now one of the leading editors). We hired an editing machine, a movieola as it is called, and sat alone joining the shots in sequence.

There another lesson awaited me and shook me to the core. The shots wouldn't 'cut'. In other words, they were taken in the way I had directed but joining didn't make them flow. Actually our film showed that mere cutting is not applicable in all circumstances. I now realized that a grammarian could write a whole chapter on these problems of filming one character following another and their maintaining equal interest in both at all times and making the journey cinematically interesting.

I hoped to make up for the lack the next Sunday when we would go back to our location and carry on with the scene. What happened on this day, I described in an article I wrote for *Sight & Sound*. Here is the relevant extract:

> On the following Sunday, we were back at the same location—but was it the same one? It was difficult to believe it. What was on the previous occasion a sea of fluffy whiteness was now a mere expanse of uninteresting brownish grass. We knew *kaash* was a seasonal flower, but surely it was not that short-lived. A local peasant provided the explanation. The flowers, he said, were food for the cattle. The cows and buffaloes had come to graze the day before and had literally chewed up the scenery.

This was a major set-back and for the first time I found what I considered a compromise. I even had the suicidal notion of chopping the *kaash* flowers. The children would see the train by a field of paddy. It was near harvest time and I must have been out of my mind. I did take such a shot with Apu and Durga looking on as a train passed in the distance.

The Wall was not available, so we used an Eyemo hand-held camera, with only one 2.5 mm wide-angle lens. The shot went perfectly, but the lens made a pinpoint of the train and produced a shot with zero impact. I vowed never to compromise again. We decided we would suspend shooting for the time being and concentrate on other things, such as finding some assistants, fixing up a sound recordist, finding actors for the other roles and above all, finding old auntie. Another thing that needed to be located was the village which would serve as the Nischindipur of the novel.

The village that we selected for the film was recommended to us by one of the founder members of the film society—Manoj Mazumdar. It was only four miles from the city limits and this meant that we could make daily trips. Manoj took us one afternoon to the place of a relative of his in the village which was called Boral. Boral was a big village with a school, and some of it had acquired the look of a small town and didn't suit our purpose. But then the mango trees, the jungle of bamboos, open fields, ponds with water lilies in them and old thatched mud houses were exactly right for us. We had been looking out for a river near the village as in the novel but we decided to drop that. It was a great piece of luck that we found a village so near Calcutta.

In Boral we found a one-storied house with two rooms and a verandah which seemed to fit the description of Harihar Roy's house in the book. In the courtyard was the remnant of a thatched one-room cottage, which could easily serve as old auntie's dwelling place. What was lacking was a kitchen, but there was room for it in the courtyard and Bansi said he could build one quite easily. The whole place needed cleaning up and renovating and a proper compound wall with an outer door before we could do any shooting there. We

made enquiries and found that the house belonged to a certain Mr Ghosal who lived in South Calcutta. Further enquiries produced his address and we went and promptly called on him. As it turned out, Mr Ghosal was noncommittal. His son met us at the door and asked me the reason for our visit. He took us to a small bedroom.

In the bed was the father who had bronchial trouble. We repeated to him why we had come and politely told him that we wanted to use his broken down house at Boral for the purpose of making a film there. 'Broken down?' roared Mr Ghosal, rising from his sick-bed and standing up. 'Who the hell says it's broken down? It's in bloody good shape.' We thought it best not to argue with him and took his word for it. 'The thing is, we need your permission to shoot there.' 'How long will you be using my house?' 'That we couldn't say, but it may come to four or six months.' Some more expletives, some more coughing and then Mr Ghosal said, 'I'll let you use my house if you pay Rs 50 a month for it.' 'When we finish shooting the house will be usable again,' pointed out Choudhury. 'A fat lot of use I have for that fucking house.' Ghosal indicated with a sign that the interview had come to an end and we took our leave. The son came to the door and said we could get in touch with him in a day or two, since we proposed to start clearing and constructing right away. The son made it plain that the rent had to be paid from the time we started restoration work and not from the time we started shooting.

Bansi and Anil got going in a week's time, making daily trips to Boral and employing labourers with the money that was left after our two days of shooting. As for the people of Boral, our shooting was something to look forward to—a diversion in their humdrum existence. Among them were two

who were both touched in the head. One was a composer by profession who lived right next to the location and was prone to break out into poetical numbers in a stentorian voice. We realized that he might cause problems at the time of shooting. The other was often heard shouting: 'Film people are here, watch out, bring out spears—bring out your guns!' This character turned out to be Subodh Chatterji, who later got to be quite friendly. He was a perpetual grumbler and would go on about all the property he had been cheated out of by his relatives.

While Bansi and Anil laboured on Harihar's home, I turned my attention to casting—although there was still no reason to believe that the backing was forthcoming. And then I had an idea.

There was an elderly gentleman called Sisir Mullick whom we knew well and who owned a playhouse. It was the only air-conditioned one in Calcutta and was called Star. I hadn't thought of him till then, but now I felt it wouldn't be a bad idea to sound him out. I reached him over the phone, introduced myself and asked for an appointment. He knew the book and was intrigued with the idea of a film version. He also knew about my ancestors and on the whole was an urbane and educated man. I told my story to Sisir Mullick with the usual flourish, building up brick by brick to the climax of Durga's death. It worked. Mr Mullick was in tears. He said it was one of the best scripts he had ever heard. He said he had no inclination towards becoming a film producer himself, but he promised he would put in a strong word to a comparatively new producer called Rana Dutt & Co. Mr Mullick said they just had a big hit and had already sailed away into a second, but could probably afford to back a third one. He introduced me to Mr Dutt, describing our project as

being an eminently worthwhile one. Mr Rana agreed to put up Rs 40,000 for us to make a start. He was quite apologetic about being unable to put up the whole amount that we asked for, but he said he would invest the rest once he had made sure that we had the professional ability to deliver the goods. I felt like shouting 'Hallelujah' but contained myself and said we would get going as soon as the house was repaired.

We proceeded to fill the gaps in our production. Bansi got in touch with Shanti Chatterji, who had considerable experience as an assistant director. I knew I would need a trained assistant to keep continuity which was a very specialized job needing experience. A film was shot in bits and pieces, an action being broken up in the middle and taken up in another shot. The actions had to match exactly for smooth cutting and an assistant was essential to make sure that the actions matched. Shanti was used to this job. In addition to which we had a new assistant, Ashish Burman—the writer-caterer—who instantly gave up his catering business, although at this stage he, like many others amongst the crew, was not to get any salary. Shanti being a professional and in straitened circumstances, had to be paid. The sound department also had to be paid as also Chunibala, of whom more later. In addition, there was the cost of raw stock, camera, the camera assistants, transportation and fund and the monthly rent of Rs 50 (for the house). The rest of the payments could be adjusted when Rana came up with the full amount.

This was also when I had to make a clean breast of the whole situation to my manager at Keymer's. I approached Mr Day and placed my cards on the table. I asked for a month's leave without pay, and when that was over, his permission to shoot on Sundays and holidays. What I tried

to do was convey my pressing need to express myself in cinematic terms, though I was not yet giving up my job. I assured him that I needed only a month to obtain the footage required to establish my bonafides. Fortunately, Day was sympathetic. 'I can see it would be useless to try to dissuade you,' he said, 'on the other hand, I need the assurance from you that you won't quit your job. You are important to me and to Keymer's.' I thanked him and left my Keymer's comrades.

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Looking for professionals having general acting experience, we chose a couple of film and stage actresses, Reva Devi and Aparna Devi, who would play the two neighbours of Harihar Roy, the one sympathetic to Sarbajaya and the other the selfish and mean widow of a rich landowner. It was Reva Devi who told us to make enquiries about an actress who had been on the stage for thirty years and was now forgotten. 'She must be about eighty and she has been quite inactive all these years. All I know is that she is still living.' She also said that we should enquire at Nibhanani Devi's (another actress) place about the actress in question. Nibhanani Devi lived in the outer limits of Calcutta. She was in her fifties and was still active on stage and screen. We got her address and Anil, Bansi and I turned up at her home on a Sunday evening.

'Well, well, so you've at last remembered my mother,' she said, as we asked her about the old retired actress Chunibala. Nibhanani was, in fact, not her daughter at all, but she called her 'mother' out of long attachment and affection. 'Sit down and have a cup of tea while I fetch her.'

We sat down in the sitting room, the walls of which were plastered with photographs which showed Nibhanani sitting at the feet of a man wearing a shirt and dhoti. It was easy to surmise that the man was her keeper. Other pictures showed Nibhanani in costume for various films and stage roles she had performed. An old fan with four blades turned overhead with a groaning noise as we sat and waited for Chunibala.

Presently she appeared in widow's white, a bent old woman with sunken cheeks and gray hair cut short, who smiled toothlessly at us.

'Do take your seats, do take your seats,' she said and I held my breath as I watched the old woman without saying a word. There was no question of my speaking, as she had already begun to talk about herself—roles she had performed in her halcyon days and how cruelly she had been cast away like a wet rag when she had crossed the age when she could no longer play heroine.

It was Nibhanani who silenced her. 'Mother, these gentlemen are from the film business. They have come to offer you a part.'

'But what part can I play at the age of eighty?'

'That of an eighty-year-old woman,' I said.

'I don't have an answer to that. Ha ha!' chuckled Chunibala. It was now time to ask her a question. I had no doubt in my mind that physically she was more than right for the part but my question was a crucial one and had to be direct.

'Do you think you'll be able to memorise lines as you'll be moving around while acting?'

'I haven't lost my memory yet. Let me recite a nursery rhyme to you.' And she astounded us by singing a well-known lullaby. I had always thought it consisted of only

six lines; she recited more than twenty! My thoughts were now racing. Why, she could sing too. Why not give old auntie an opportunity to sing? It would be most touching.

'Where will you be shooting?' asked Chunibala.

'Not in a studio, but in a cottage. You'll be playing the old cousin of a Brahmin priest. We'll take you in a car straight to the spot, which is fifteen miles away, and bring you back after finishing in early evening. Do you think you can put up with the strain?'

'I think so, I have been conserving my energy for just this kind of opportunity. But I don't have a smooth skin. All actresses have a smooth skin. Will you put make-up on me?'

'No, we won't.'

I explained then what we had in mind was an unorthodox approach.

Nibhanani, who was listening to our conversation, now interrupted. 'Can you pay her ten rupees a day?' she asked challengingly. Anil said, 'I'll pay her twenty.' The deal was closed.

Three

Fade-in, Fade-out

I DECIDED EARLY on to shoot *Pather Panchali*, as far as possible, in sequence. The first day's experience had made me wise to the fact that we would be learning as we went along. All the years spent viewing Hollywood films and taking notes in the dark had taught me how to shoot an American subject. I now had to learn how to shoot an Indian subject, a Bengali subject, a rural one. The really difficult scenes—the railway train, the death of auntie, Durga being jerked by her hair and thrown out of the house by her mother after being accused of having stolen a necklace, Durga's joyous dance in the rain, her illness and death, Harihar's returning home and learning of Durga's death, Sarbajaya's anguished outburst—all these take place in the second half of the film and called for experience that I hoped to get on the strength of one month's shooting. The house being ready (Bansi had done a wonderful job of face lifting) we decided to start shooting there. One of the main hurdles had already been crossed. I had no firsthand knowledge of life in a village. But the frequent trips to Boral while Bansi built the house and making the acquaintance of the people there, who took us into their homes and offered us tea and home-made sweets, gradually made us familiar with the life described in the novel. As I wrote in the *Sight & Sound* article, what I lacked was firsthand acquaintance with the nucleus of the story. I came, of course, to depend upon the book itself, which was

a vivid encyclopedia of Bengal's rural life. But I knew that that wasn't enough, there were things I had to discover for myself. Evaluating life in the village opened up a new fascinating world. To one born and bred in the city, it had a new flavour, a new texture and its values were different. It made you want to touch and probe, to watch for the revealing details, the telling gestures, the particular terms of speech. You wanted to fathom the mysteries of atmosphere. You wanted to watch the subtle difference between dawn and dusk and convey the grey humid stillness that pervaded the first monsoon shower. Is the sunlight in spring the same as the sunlight in autumn? The more you probed the more was revealed and familiarization bred not contempt but love, understanding and tolerance.

Since I never kept a diary of *Pather Panchali*, I do not truly recall when I resumed shooting with Rana's money but I remember it was in 1953 in the early part of the season in Calcutta. I cast my mind back to those days and I am struck by the signal lack of professionalism on our part. We had chalked up a programme of sorts, but we had no cast-iron schedule. As I've said before, we didn't seem to have a proper shooting script. I had already acquired the habit of doing sketches of shots which would almost look like the story treatment of what the editing would be. Subrata, Bansi and Shanti, my first assistant, got used to the system and found it more expressive than a cold sheet of typewritten text. My notes were handed over to them just a few days before they were needed for the shooting. The dialogue was kept to a minimum and taken straight from the book. I had asked my writer assistant, Burman, to write some simple dialogue for one of the scenes and he produced loud literary speech. I read it and handed it back to him again. Then the problems of film

making began to fade into the background, and you found yourself belittling the importance of the camera. After all, it was merely an instrument. The important thing was the truth. Get at it and you had your great masterpieces. But how wrong we were! The moment you are on the set, this three-legged instrument took charge. Problems came thick and fast. Where to place the camera? High or low, near or far, on the dolly or on the ground? Was the thirty-five okay? Would you rather move back and use the fifty? Get too close to the action and the emotion of the scene spilled out—get it too far back and the thing became cold and remote. To each problem you had to find a quick answer. If you delayed, the sun shifted and made nonsense of your uncertainty.

I recall the first day of shooting in Boral quite clearly. It was the first scene of the film with Durga and old auntie. Durga was then only four or five years old and was played by Karuna Bannerji's daughter Runki. Auntie was having her breakfast of fluffed rice soaked in milk, sitting on the verandah of her cottage, while Durga sat nearby leaning against a bamboo post, apparently hoping to get a share of the food. For Chunibala this was no problem, for she had only one line of dialogue after her meal—'Oh dear, I have left nothing for you'—eating itself being one of the simplest things for an actor to do. Having learnt a lesson from Apu's walk, I realized that the simple act of Durga's sitting and looking might appear wooden too, unless I provided her with some business. With this in mind, I gave her a length of silver ribbon and asked her to slowly wind and unwind it around her left forefinger with her right hand. She could then seem to have half a mind on this action and the rest on auntie's eating. I took the shot as planned and it worked well, so well in fact that I let the camera roll on, until I heard Bansi call

out, 'Come on Manik, say "cut".' (Manik is my nickname).

We had to work on location by light in the morning. It was Anil's duty to collect the actors needed for the day, to pick them by taxi and deposit them on location. He had to be up very early indeed and this was fairly difficult although he had an alarm clock. To solve this particular matter he hit upon an extraordinary plan. He asked our taxi driver, a Sikh named Bachan Singh whom we had hired for our location shooting, to park the taxi across a tram line after midnight when the trams stopped plying. Anil would then sleep in the taxi—certain that the first tram to come up in the morning at 5 a.m. would wake him up by the impatient clanging of its bell.

The shooting soon fell into a pattern. We would arrive around 8 a.m. and have a breakfast of samosas and tea. Subrata would settle down to the task of cleaning the lenses and filters and sound recordist Bhupen Ghosh would set up his Kinevox recorder in a room which already existed. This room was a part of the plan of Harihar's house behind the bedroom we had built. By this time, all the local people would arrive and get into the house, I would start rehearsals and decide on the camera point and lenses.

We were now using a proper Mitchell camera hired from one of the studios. It came with a fairly full complement of lenses. We would start shooting as soon as the light was right. There was a lunch break around one o'clock, which was the hottest part of the day, and we would resume after an hour and keep going as long as the light permitted.

The required footage would be deposited in the lab on our way back from work and we would watch the rushes two or three days later. The footage worked all right. Karuna was gradually shedding her urban mannerisms and getting under

1. *Pather Panchali*: Litle Durga, Apu's sister (Runki Bannerji), smiles as she looks into the large earthenware jar in which she hides her kittens.

2. *Pather Panchali*: Sarbojaya, Apu's mother (Karuna Bannerji), sits worrying about her family, just as Durga (Uma Dasgupta) joyfully arrives with a large fish.

3. *Aparajito*: Young Apu (Pinaki Sen Gupta) absorbs the wonders of life in the holy city of Benares, so astonishing after his early childhood spent in a village.

4. *Aparajito*: The ghats of Benares, that line the River Ganges. Ray noted: 'Incomparable atmosphere. One just want to go on absorbing it, being enchanted and invigorated by it.'

5. *Apur Sansar*: Apu (Soumitra Chatterji), would-be writer, now without father or mother, whiles away his time in his bachelor garret above the railway station yard in Calcutta.

6. *Apur Sansar*: Aparna (Sharmila Tagore), about to be married to a reluctant Apu, is decorated by her mother as a traditional Bengali bride.

7. *Pather Panchali*: Ray prepares Chunibala Devi, who plays the old aunt Indir Thakrun, for the scene of her death in a bamboo grove. Delighted with her role, Chunibala lived just long enough to see the completed film.

8. *Pather Panchali*: part of a series of sketches by Ray, drawn in 1952, in the hope of attracting finance for his film from producers. They show what would become the film's most famous sequence, in which Apu and Durga run through the field of white kaash flowers and see their very first railway train.

the skin of Sarbajaya. Kanu Bannerji, the professional playing the father, complained again and again, referring to the absurdity of acting without make-up and the length of time it took to speak Bibhuti Bhusan's lines.

I had devised all kinds of tricks to get the right kind of performance out of Apu, but Durga was a fourteen-year-old of great promise. There was no doubt that she felt wholly sympathetic to the role and consequently acted with greater acumen. The most outstanding performance was of course Chunibala's. She came straight out of the pages of the novel, Indir Thakrun. She was thrilled to be back at work after thirty years of a vegetable existence. She felt already at home in the part and never gave us a moment's trouble, as long as she had her dollop of opium with her afternoon tea. The one day that she didn't remember to have it, she nearly fainted.

As work progressed, our funds naturally dwindled. We still had some alternative scenes left to do when Rana's latest film opened, and was a resounding flop.

In a few weeks we came to the end of our resources. Rana confronted us with the sordid fact that he was unable to provide us with the rest of the production cost as he had to wind up his business.

Since we had shot half a scene the day before and were hoping to finish the rest, Choudhury asked Rana for money for just one day's shooting, Rs 250. Rana said he would do his best to find the money. But on the day of the shooting, he threw up his hands, 'Sorry Mr Choudhury, I was expecting some money from a certain source but it hasn't materialised. I don't even have 250 rupees for you.' However, since all the arrangements had been made and we were most anxious to finish the scene before the monsoon broke, Anil took the only course that was open to him. He went to my wife and asked

for some of her jewellery which he hoped to pawn. Bijoya parted with some of her ornaments without letting my mother know and Choudhury obtained Rs 1,200 by pawning them. With that money we did another three to four days of shooting—then we called a halt. We had reached what seemed to all intents and purposes the limit. Tears were shed, everyone went back to their normal routine. I found myself back at my desk at Keymer's.

The footage was later edited and came to about four thousand feet or roughly a third of the film. The thing certainly looked professional, although the nature of the material was sharply at variance with the common run of Bengali films. Perhaps there was an off-chance that the footage would catch the fancy of some producer.

It didn't. We showed the rough cut to virtually everyone who had put up money at some point or another to a film maker. The reaction was dampeningly uniform. 'Who would come to see an old hag like that?' 'Where was the love interest?' 'Why were there no songs?'

At this stage I discovered a fact in Anil Choudhury that I wasn't aware he possessed. When he saw that absolutely all sources of money had been exhausted and that the film had to be shelved, he suddenly stopped coming to our house, thus depriving me of my only hope of finding an alternative producer. He absconded for eight months before suddenly turning up one day with the proposal of confronting Dr B.C. Roy with my problems. This was daunting but we decided to give it a try.

Probably the leading physician of India, counting Gandhi among his patients, Dr B.C. Roy was the Chief Minister of West Bengal, with his office running a whole block of the State Secretariat called the Writers' Building.

Anil Choudhury knew a clerk in one of the departments and it was he who had suggested that he approach Dr Roy to put up money to complete the film. His argument was that since Dr Roy belonged to the same community as me, namely Brahmo, which has certain features in common with Unitarianism and does not subscribe to Hindu orthodoxy, we stood a chance. Anil came and discussed the matter in the presence of my mother.

'But I know the best way to approach Dr Roy,' exclaimed my mother. 'It's through my friend Bela!' Mrs Bela Sen was in her late fifties, a couple of years younger than my mother and the wife of Col J.L. Sen. Like us and Dr Roy, the Sens were also Brahmos. The Brahmos being a small community, most of the families knew one another—at least slightly. Dr Roy, himself a bachelor, happened to be very close to the Sen family, and Mrs Sen had considerable influence over him.

Mother went to her friend and brought back the news that Bela had agreed to broach the subject to Dr Roy. A few days later, word came from the Chief Minister's office that Dr Roy would like to see me to discuss *Pather Panchali*.

I turned up at the office on the aforementioned day at the appointed time and upon being asked, gave Dr Roy an outline of what had happened so far. One of Bela Sen's daughters was present at the meeting and was astonished that Dr Roy had never heard of Bibhuti Bhusan or of his great masterpiece. Archana, the eldest daughter of Bela Sen, was an educated and an intelligent girl and she was quite emphatic in praising the book as a classic and excellent film material. I proceeded to give a brief outline of the story, which was fortunately not a difficult task. When the shortened story came to an end, Dr Roy asked, 'You have a tragic ending.

The family leaves home to migrate to Benaras. Why? Couldn't the other villagers persuade them to stay? Help them to rebuild their wrecked house? Can't you inject a message which would go in favour of our work on community development?' Archana came to my rescue again. 'The ending is too well-known and very moving. There would be objections from the readers of the novel as well as from the family if the ending was changed in any way.'

'At any rate,' observed Dr Roy, 'if we have to finance the film at all, it will have to be done under the Community Development Project, as otherwise we have no provision for feature films.' I said it didn't matter under what head the film fell, as long as there was no compulsion to change the ending—that would amount to literary vandalism.

Dr Roy was convinced and, as was his wont, made up his mind quickly. 'However,' he said, 'you will have to show what you have filmed to Mathur of Home (Publicity) Department.' I took my leave of Dr Roy, and went in search of Mr Mathur. A screening of the footage was arranged in a miniature cinema. Present at the screening were Mr Mathur, and a well-known playwright called Manmatha Roy. Roy, fortunately, was ecstatic about the footage. Mathur made no comments at all. It was revealed later that he had given a very negative report about the film to Dr Roy and said that any money spent on the film would go down the drain. Luckily for us Dr Roy gave more credence to Manmatha Roy's assessment.

The Government's legal department man, Mr Mitra, next proceeded to draw up a long agreement. We had given an original budget estimate of Rs 70,000; this included the amount to be paid to Mrs Bannerji for the film rights and

Rana Dutt was to have his Rs 40,000 back. The only person who was not to receive anything at this stage was myself. I was earning a salary from Keymer's and I suggested that I be paid a share of the takings from foreign sales, if such a thing ever happened. Mr Mathur agreed, but when the agreement was drawn up, I found no mention of foreign rights. I questioned Mr Mathur and was told that it was a small matter which would be attended to once the film was ready. I took him on trust.

In Keymer's another change of managers had taken place. Mr Nicholson, an ex-army man, lean and tall with a handlebar moustache, had replaced Kenneth Day. Like the previous ones, Mr Nicholson too liked my work very much and we got to be quite friendly. He was an extremely good calligrapher and a considerable artist as was evident from a fat album he was preparing of handwriting samples over the years. The time had come to confront him with our new situation. It was obvious that I couldn't do with just a month's leave with pay now. According to the agreement with the Government, the money would come in instalments. How regular these instalments would be was anybody's guess at that stage. What it meant was that I would have to be working on the film off and on, as and when we had funds.

I had a long chat with Nicholson. He asked me to relate the story to him in a nutshell, which I did. Nicholson was moved. 'It seems it would be useless to say "no" to you. You couldn't possibly work at a desk with such an uncertain project at the back of your mind. Take leave when you need it. I will pay your salary.' This was like manna from heaven. I was filled with gratitude and made that quite clear when I thanked him. Now that I come to think of it, Nicholson as much as Dr Roy made it possible for me to make *Pather Panchali*.

Soon after my wife parted with her jewellery, I had to sell some of my records and rare books to pay for some of the shooting. The jewellery was retrieved as soon as the first instalment of money came, but the books and records were gone forever.

In the interim, our son Sandip was born on 8 September 1953.

I must describe another incident that took place before Dr Roy came to our aid. This is the kind of incident that unless one has one's wits about him, can make one fall prey to superstition.

This is the way it happened. Let me describe it then.

It so happened that I woke up one morning and glancing at the window behind me saw a whitish brown owl (it was more white than brown) sitting on the shutter of a window that opened on the outside.

The owl had its eyes riveted on me. I came up to the window, looking silently at the bird—it didn't move a muscle. While I stood watching, I heard shouting from the neighbouring flats. Our house was set back from the main road, but could be seen by at least a dozen neighbours from adjoining flats. They were now calling out to the owl and making enticing noises.

My wife joined me. The reason for the excitement dawned on us both at the same time. In Indian mythology, the owl is the mount of Lakshmi, the goddess of luck and wealth, and an owl sitting on your window must naturally arouse the neighbours' envy.

All the shouting and crying and whistling didn't perturb the bird at all. It kept its eyes fixed on me. I took out my Leica and took a picture of the bird. The 'click' didn't bother the bird at all. The owl stayed in the same position for two whole

weeks and then it was gone. Whether it moved during the night, I couldn't say, but each morning I found it in exactly the same spot—looking at me in exactly the same way.

Shortly after it was gone, came the summons from Dr Roy. I had to bring into operation all the rationality that I possessed in order not to fall prey to superstition but I still can't account for the astonishing phenomenon.

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Now that I come to think of it, the delay appears to some extent to have been a blessing in disguise. I was back at my desk of course, looking after my twin responsibilities of designing ads as well as books. I don't honestly think I ever gave up hope of resuming work on the film. I kept my fingers crossed lest Apu and Durga should grow up to the extent that there would be continuity problems. I worried about Chunibala who was going to have an operation and wondered if she would afterwards retain the zest for her role and I worried about my crew, some of whom failed to get absorbed into other films with other companies. But apart from all this, there were several advantages as well.

We made frequent trips to Boral to our location, to bitterly indulge in nostalgia and also to make sure it wasn't tampered with. We were happy to see that the film was acquiring a patina that only time could imprint. It meant it wouldn't seem like a set when and if we resumed our work. Also my editor and I had several looks at the footage and spotted some flaws which he would have to be careful not to repeat again. In addition, the script received embellishments during this long inactive period and became twice as exciting as it was before.

For example, on one of our visits to Boral, Bansi, Subrata and I had been sitting silently by the pond, chatting idly. The pond was covered with scum and I was throwing pebbles into it without actually noticing or being aware of what I was doing. Once I tossed a pebble and watched it hit the scum in the pond. The scum trembled at the impact and then slowly closed over the pebble as it sank. Instantly I felt a tingling sensation. The sight had given me a brilliant idea in a crucial scene. It comes towards the end of the story. Apu discovers by accident the necklace Durga had stolen from a neighbour. He had to conceal the fact from everyone else and so he throws the necklace into a bush from behind their house. At least that is how the scene is described in the book and the script in my mind. How much more telling it would be to throw it into the pond; the scum would help him to conceal the secret forever.

One of the hardest things to describe in a film is the prime point at which a shot should end. Even a few frames beyond the cutting point can upset the rhythm of a film and make it look far longer. This is all the more important in a film with very little dialogue. There were other aspects of the film to be considered. We already know that the addition of sound, not necessarily words, to a shot in a silent film made it seem sharper. *Pather Panchali* contained many scenes which we realized would have to be bolstered with the addition of sound effects, if not music. That meant a survey of possible sources of sound in a rural setting. Bird calls could be used, especially when there were trees in the vicinity, but only upto a point, as otherwise monotony would result.

In the time that we waited for money, I went back to the village with my ears open and made a note of sound effects which would be used. A breeze over a bamboo grove could

make the tall bamboos sway with a moaning music. A breeze over a lotus pond caused the flapping of lotus leaves. To suggest morning, there were the early bird calls, the cawing of the crow, for instance, while evening resounded with the far and near sounds of conch-shells and the chirping of crickets. Late nights were ushered in by the hoots of owls and the howling of jackals. A very important sound in the evening in the story is the sound of the distant railway train, which is brought nearer on just one occasion. Evenings were also marked by singing, much favoured by Bengalis, to the accompaniment of the box harmonium. All these I noted down, as I waited for the resumption of work.

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Once the agreement with the Government was signed, Anil Choudhury went around informing the artists that work was about to resume. Only Durga's father, the ex-footballer, made a cynical comment in Bengali, which translates as, 'You've squeezed the lemon until it's turned bitter. Do you want it to taste even more bitter?' But Durga herself and her mother and elder sisters all received the news with utmost happiness.

There was some more casting to do. For the part of the schoolmaster-cum-grocer who keeps his cane embedded in a large bag of sugar, I chose a veteran comedian Tulsi Chakravarty, who had a wonderfully mobile comic face and had made fleeting appearances in almost all Bengali films. For some of the other old men who came to Harihar to try to dissuade him from leaving the village, I decided to use non-actors from Boral itself. There was the role of an old

bald-headed man who goes to sit by a pond with a fishing rod in hand and dozes off only to be suddenly awakened by a drop of rain falling on his head. I had a particular person in mind, whose name I didn't know, but who had come to watch me shooting several times running. The problem was to find him. I described the man in some detail, squat, rounded cheeks, bald head, moustache—but this didn't work. Then I tried another method. I got hold of some paper and pencil and made a sketch of him from memory. 'Hari Babu,' the villagers shouted. The right person was produced in no time at all. I think this feat brought me more acclaim than anything else I had done in the years we spent in Boral.

Four

Action At Last

WE RESUMED SHOOTING where we had left off in the early part of 1954. With money in their pockets, the crew worked with redoubled energy. During the first spell, Bansi and Subrata had only received a packet of cigarettes a day, but now like the others they were on the payroll, although the pay was small.

Luckily, Durga and Apu had not grown noticeably in the last eight months. Old auntie had long hair now, which had to be cut short by my assistant, Shanti Chatterji. Scissors were not available, we had to use a blade instead. Chunibala's energy and enthusiasm were undiminished.

Resuming work, I could clearly see that my confidence had grown in the eight months. I still made occasional mistakes in exits and entrances (a character who exits from the right in one shot, must enter from the left in the next shot and so on), but was pulled up short by Nemai Ray, the first assistant cameraman who had the longest experience among my crew.

It was decided that for the night scenes Bansi would build a replica of the three cottages in the studio. When the time came this was done with his usual meticulousness. Bansi built a perfect replica, visualizing exactly the relationship between the three cottages, even the texture of the walls.

Subrata had no experience of studio lighting but picked it up fast enough. He tried out shadowy shots which were

recorded through the smoke of lurid oil lamps in order to keep things as realistic as possible.

A host of memories stand out of the shooting around this period. The schoolmaster scene came out beautifully, with Tulsi Chakravarty revelling in his part and declaring at the end of the day that he hadn't ever been given such interesting business to perform in his thirty years of film making.

A very interesting scene involved a sweetmeat seller, Chinibas. He peddles sweets in earthen pots hanging from the two ends of a pole which he carries on his shoulders. A fat jovial man, a non-professional we had chosen, was perfect for the part. The scene involved his passing outside Harihar's house on the other side and calling out—'Sweets for sale, do you want any sweets?' Durga and Apu run out of the house to look longingly at Chinibas knowing only too well that they can't afford to buy any sweets. Chinibas calls out again and Durga shakes her head and Chinibas goes on his way with his pots swinging with his gait. The sight is too enticing and Durga decides to follow Chinibas to watch other people buying sweets. Apu runs alongside. This is how the scene is described in the book. I wanted to make it a little more interesting by having their pet dog join in the pursuit. We had found a brown pariah dog during the first spell of shooting and used him in a few shots. It was an untrained dog, but it wasn't required to do anything that needed training. This time, however, the dog had to perform. He is shown sitting curved under a tree somewhere behind Apu and Durga and as soon as Durga runs out of the shot in pursuit of Chinibas, the dog seems to spring up and run behind her. Thus the procession would consist of Chinibas, followed by Apu,

followed by Durga, followed by the dog. All through the day the dog had to keep working. I made Durga clap her hands behind her back and holding a sweet in one of them, to entice the dog.

We had a few rehearsals with Durga walking and the dog following; as it turned out, the snag was how we were going to make the dog jump and run after Durga in the same shot the moment the latter started following Chinibas. A man was stationed just behind the camera to call out to the dog at the required moment. It took eleven 'takes' to get the action right. Fortunately, in the truly great shots, including the one in which the procession is reflected in the pond, the dog behaved perfectly.

Eleven takes are not such an unusual figure for films where one monkeys with four-footed animals. And, when compared to the directorial effort of our Western brothers, it's nothing. William Wyler is supposed to have asked one of his actors to compare what he did on the eleventh take with what he did on the twenty-fifth!

My own experience with trained professionals is that the first take is normally the best. If I find it unsatisfactory, I go for a second one. Non-professionals may call for more takes, but I have rarely gone beyond two, certainly not in *Pather Panchali*.

Although we were in funds now, the money came, as I've said before, in instalments. We had to render accounts for our expenditure each time which would be meticulously checked by the Accounts Department before they would release the next instalment. This process of scrutinizing often took more than a month, and caused serious problems for us, apart from gaps in shooting. For instance, our funds ran out after one day's shooting with Chinibas. The scene where he

reaches the rich Mukherjee house, while Apu and Durga stand watching from the gate, was yet to be shot and had to be postponed for lack of money. By the time we received our next instalment, the amateur who played Chinibas was dead of a stroke. With great difficulty we found a substitute with the same bulky gait. Fortunately, the shots that were needed showed only his back and nobody noticed the change.

We also desperately needed a great deal of rain for one scene—Durga's joyous dance and the children huddled together under a tree, while the camera panned all around. Yes, in the season when the rains were most frequent, which is, at the height of monsoon in July and August, the Government was busy checking our accounts. When the instalment did come, the real rainy season was over. It meant that we had to go daily to the location with the children, praying for an off-season downpour.

It took us three days to take the shots of the natural phenomena which took place in the vicinity in which we sat and waited. Shots of water lilies, dragonflies dancing over the foliage in a pond, banana leaves and lotus leaves swaying in a breeze, all these eventually found a place in scenes which were not in the book nor in my script.

Eventually, it did rain heavily for over an hour in the middle of autumn in October. The scene was in the can and had come out very well.

Before, in the early part of summer, when we had money and the days turned gloomy, we shot the scenes which follow the death of Durga. All the scenes that took place after the death were shot in the early months, so that the feeling of gloom could be carefully sustained.

In the spring of 1954 an event took place which had important repercussions on our film. Monroe Wheeler, one

of the Directors of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, came to Calcutta with the idea of putting together an exhibition of Indian highlights at the museum. He came to Keymer's and met me. I told him I was making a film. He showed considerable interest. 'Could you show me some stills?' he asked.

On looking at the stills, his interest doubled. He immediately made a proposal for showing the film as part of the exhibition which would open in May the following year. I made a quick mental calculation and said the film would be ready by then. He said that he would be delighted to hold a world première at the MOMA. The deal was clinched, although there was nothing on paper. Wheeler left, saying he would keep in touch.

We informed Mr Mathur of the development and pleaded with him to speed up the payment of the instalments, as I was most anxious to keep the deadline. The development seemed providential to me and I realized the possibility in it of a world market opening up, provided it all worked as planned. The rough cut was more than 9,000 feet in length and I secretly congratulated myself on the work I had done. All the members of my unit were excited by what they saw on the screen. It actually resembled no other film made in India or elsewhere in the world. Above all, in spite of the influences on me of Hollywood, Renoir and de Sica, the film looked Indian to the core.

Six months later, as we were in the last phase of production, John Huston came to Calcutta. I had seen his *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and greatly admired him. A cine friend of mine, R.P. Gupta, the P.R.O. at J. Walter Thompson, received a phone call from one of their clients saying that Huston was arriving and

might be met at the airport. Gupta was intrigued and called me to convey the news that Huston had asked to see me upon being told about my unfinished film.

The main purpose of Huston's visit was to scout locations for Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* in Kathmandu. At the time he was planning to make the film with Humphrey Bogart.

I went to see Huston at the same hotel where Renoir had stayed, the Great Eastern. 'So, you are making a film?' he began. 'I've just been given the outline of the story by Gupta here and it sounds very interesting. Could you show me some of it?' I said the rough cut was in pretty bad shape, the printing was a bit uneven and the sound was not at all of professional quality. He said it didn't matter. 'I'll make allowances for that. After all, I'm a film maker myself.'

I agreed to show Huston about half an hour of the rough cut, avoiding the wordy scenes and concentrating on the visual highlights—above all the scene of the running train in the field of *kaash*. Huston was moved. 'A fine, sincere piece of film making, which should go down well in the West,' was his comment. Then it turned out that he was a friend of Monroe Wheeler's; Wheeler had asked him to get in touch with me in Calcutta and enquire about the progress of the film and if possible to take a look at some of the footage.

Huston went back to the US and gave glowing reports to Wheeler who wrote and asked how I was getting on. I wrote back to say it was tough going because of reasons beyond our control, but I was confident we would be able to send the print on time.

The shooting was coming to a close and I had now to think of background music. I thought of Ravi Shankar partly because I knew him well personally and partly because I

liked the sound of his instrument, the sitar, and hoped he would use it in his score.

Ravi Shankar then lived in Delhi. I wrote to him asking if he would agree to undertake the job. He willingly gave his consent. I had mentioned the time when I would need him and he said that there would be no problem.

I had, of course, shot the scene of old auntie's death, but had not succeeded in attaining the mood that it needed to be rounded off with. The shot of the dead body being carried on a bier on the shoulders of the villagers was yet to be taken. When poor people who cannot afford a proper bier die, they are borne on a bamboo stretcher to which the body is bound by a rope to prevent it from toppling over. This was how auntie was to be carried.

Although the shooting was officially over, Anil went to fetch auntie for one last day's work. I had warned him not to tell her what kind of a shot was needed. 'Just tell her that the shooting will be very simple and will be over in an hour.'

When auntie arrived, she glanced at the bamboo stretcher which was lying on the ground with a coil of rope beside it. Slowly her face lit up. 'You mean you are going to take me to be cremated? Which living person has ever had this experience? Come on, tie me up!'

She proceeded to lie on the stretcher while four men held it up. Shanti put the rope round her body and tied a knot. The shot was taken very early on a winter morning, with the men disappearing with the body into the mist.

After the shot the stretcher was brought back and placed on the ground. Chunibala lay deathly still. I had to tell her that the shot had already been taken before she would open her eyes and stir.

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We had worked out when the print had to be delivered in order to reach New York in time for the première and this was three months away. In that period I had to take a second look at the rough cut with my editor for possible corrections, check the music, check the sound effects (one which didn't seem to catch the effects of the telegraph pole) for the final cut, the mixing and the printing. I had told Wheeler that there would be no time for subtitling. He had agreed to show the film without them.

Watching the rough cut again carefully, I felt that there were some flaws in the early part of the film, which could no longer be redeemed as they would involve reshooting. The flaws were entirely due to my inexperience and had to do largely with camera placements and the use of lenses. The second half seemed quite clearly the work of a more experienced man. The shooting in sequence had been handled well.

Ravi Shankar arrived for just two days, one evening of which would be given over to a public recital. He had asked for only Indian instruments and we had got in touch with a flautist, Aloke Dey, who also provided musicians for a film score. Ravi Shankar was putting up with a musician friend of his and I went and saw him there. He hadn't read the book, but was aware of its merit. He knew it was a regional subject which actually took place in a village and dealt with a small boy's growing up in the midst of poverty.

The very first thing he told me was, 'I have a musical concept of your film.' He then proceeded to hum a tune. I was astonished. It was beautiful and just right for the film. He proceeded to discuss the method he would use for his work. I knew it would be unorthodox. Although Ravi Shankar had worked in a couple of films before and had

composed some light music, I knew he would have to see the film before he could decide which portions called for music. He could then proceed to rehearse, taking into account the length of the passages and composing strictly within that given time. I knew this was not possible in this case for Ravi Shankar had kept only one day for me. He was essentially a virtuoso, to bind him down to a system he was not used to would be wrong. I didn't raise the question of method at all, but waited to see what he would do.

We arranged a screening the same afternoon. His recital was on the following day and whatever he was to do for the film had to be done today. Aloke Dey was asked to turn up with his musicians at the studio at 4 p.m. He himself was an excellent flautist and the other instruments to be used would consist of the sitar (which Ravi Shankar would play himself), a high pitched instrument called the tar shehnai, a chamang (a string cymbal) and a percussion instrument called a cutachary. For one crucial scene I had a musical effect in my mind, which I decided to persuade Ravi Shankar to maintain. This was the scene in which Harihar returns from the city to discover from his wife that Durga had died.

Sarbajaya had remained silent the first few minutes and Harihar wrongly surmised that she was vexed because he had delayed his return. As Harihar hands her a sari he has bought for Durga, Sarbajaya can contain herself no longer and breaks out weeping. I had shot the scene as described and everything had worked out well except Sarbajaya's grief-stricken outburst. It didn't sound right. Then I saw it without sound and found that visually it was perfect and therefore decided to substitute the lamentation with a high controlled instrument like the tar shehnai, which would be suggestive of grief.

Ravi Shankar had time to see a little over half of the rough cut and greatly liked what he saw. Since he did not have the time to acquaint himself with the whole film and work out when music would be needed, I had to guide him using my own instincts. There were about half a dozen highlights where music was obligatory and for the rest we decided that he could record several three-minute sitar pieces in various tempos and moods, which I could use as I thought fit at the time of final editing.

The recording of the music, which was actually improvised with notations hastily written down for the musicians, took eleven hours, starting at six and ending in the small hours of the next day. It was a marathon session and left us exhausted but happy, because most of the music sounded wonderful. The tarshehnai for the lament scene was played by one of its best exponents (D. M. Tagore), and I kept wishing that he stuck to the high notes of the raga Patdeep that was so aptly chosen by Ravi Shankar, for two full minutes.

In the short time that he had, Ravi Shankar couldn't provide the music for one of the more important scenes—that with the sweetmeat seller, as he goes peddling his sweets. I wanted music to keep time to his wobbling gait. This was devised later by my cameraman Subrata Mitra, who was also an excellent sitar player. That caused a problem for Ravi Shankar when he went on a tour of the States after *Pather Panchali* was released in 1958. At one of his recitals he was asked by a member of the audience to play the candy-man music from the film. Ravi Shankar hadn't seen the film yet, so he was not in a position to oblige, saying to the listener that he had forgotten how the music went.

I had decided to keep my editor company when we started the final editing. There were just three weeks left for

the prints to go out of our hands and be delivered to Pan Am to reach New York before the première. One of my closer acquaintances, Subhash Ghosal, was an executive at J. Walter Thompson. He had arranged with the manager in Calcutta, Charles Moorhouse, to undertake to despatch the prints to New York. The daughter of the head of J.W.T. in New York, Ann Resor, happened to be a friend of Monroe Wheeler, and she assured him that her father's company would ensure the arrival of the print in time.

I had always believed that a third of man's life is given over to sleep, if eight hours sleep was considered the optimum. The final editing of *Pather Panchali*, followed by the mixing of the sound track, took ten days and nights in which I didn't sleep at all, while my editor Dulal Dutta fell asleep for half an hour, lying on the floor of the cutting room, flat on his back, with yards of cuttings strewn all around him. As I attempted to wake him up with a faint nudge, he moaned, 'No more, not any more please.' But he did wake up with a Herculean effort and resumed working. The other members of the crew including my assistants and the assistants to the editor, would take short snoozes lying on the floor, or on a table or in a couple of armless chairs placed side by side.

What turned out to be a real nightmare was the mixing of the scene in which Durga lies critically ill while a storm rages outside. The difficulty arose from the fact that the scene involved a wide spectrum of sound effects: thunder, rain, rattling doors and windows, Durga's moans, Sarbajaya's valiant efforts to cope with the situation which involved dragging trunks across the floor and placing them against the door, where both threatened to give way . . . . The first attempt to mix the sounds drove us to the limits of despair. The sounds that were literally disjointed worked against and

ruined the visual which looked pure when seen without sound.

In the end, I decided to prepare loops of one of the sound effects. A loop is a length of film joined end to end which would run continuously producing the same sound. A properly looped sound of a door banging, for instance, if kept running, would sound like the insistent banging of a door. Similarly we could use the sound of rain falling which would have to be kept going all the time and a thunder clap, which would have to be timed to work in conjunction with the flash of lightning on the screen. It took all of us hours, till three in the morning in fact, to get the effect right. Most of the crew had fallen asleep by then except myself and the editor.

The first print of *Pather Panchali* came out late at night, the day before it was to be delivered to the Pan Am office. There was no time for me to take a look at it. In the morning, the film would be out of our hands before any of us had seen it. Along with Anil, I took the trunk to the Pan Am office. The main formalities had been completed by J.W.T. in the meantime. At Pan Am, talking to the receptionist, I fell fast asleep leaning over the counter. Anil completed the rest of the formalities and then woke me up.

Five

The Aftermath

THREE WEEKS ELAPSED after the première of *Pather Panchali* in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), yet no feedback arrived. I sank into a brooding pessimism. How could a film without subtitles about peasantry in an Indian village fare with an élite American audience in formal attire who expected to be entertained! No impact at all, that must have been it, and Monroe Wheeler felt badly about informing me about the fiasco.

Suddenly there arrived a cable from Wheeler. 'A triumph of sensitive photography,' it said. I handed over the cable to Subrata Mitra, giving him a pat on his back. And then finally came a long detailed letter from Ann Resor. She described how moving she had found the film and how well it had gone down with the audience. I showed the letter around wallowing in an euphoric inner fulfilment.

Word spread and the question came up—when would the film be released in Calcutta? This was May, and nothing yet had been done about distribution.

I am usually ignorant about the functional aspects of film production. Talk of percentages and minimum guarantees and print and publicity can go over my head—I left the matter completely in the hands of Anil Choudhury.

I myself was back in Keymer's and still drawing my salary. Nicholson naturally showed a keen interest in what I had done. He had heard of the New York première, and I

arranged a screening for Nicholson and a number of our clients, keeping up a discreet running-commentary while the unsubtitled print unfolded.

Nicholson shook my hand warmly after the show, his eyes red and shining. If I needed any further proof of the film faring well with a foreign audience, here it was.

At this time, an organisation called the Advertising Club, which had members from all the agencies, expressed a wish to hold a special screening of *Pather Panchali* for its members and invited guests. I fell in with the idea and a screening was arranged at the Ordnance Club with a buffet dinner to follow in the grounds of the club.

Monku (my wife) and I arrived a little before the screening—my heart sank when I saw the 35 mm projector planted in the middle of the chairs arranged in rows on a wooden floor which creaked as people walked on it, or even with the slightest movement of their chairs.

The auditorium was soon full. There was a good sprinkling of foreigners, as also a number of senior agency executives and their wives. The screening started on time, the sound barely rising above the whirr of the projector. The quality of the image on the screen too left much to be desired. I got out of the room and waited for the ordeal to come to an end.

Pather Panchali ran for two hours, and it was one of the worst two hours that I ever experienced. In the end there was some discreet clapping as the lights came on.

I was faintly surprised when some of the foreigners approached me and said how much they liked the film—but it was only the foreigners. The Bengalis scrupulously avoided me and filed outside for dinner. No one had a good word to say about the film and in no time small talk had

resumed along with the forks carrying the food to the mouths.

The next day I went to the office and turned up as usual for a light lunch at the Coffee House which is within walking distance of the office. This was a habit I had acquired early on in my advertising career and kept up with clockwork regularity. A good half a dozen friends converged there for what is best described by the Bengali term adda, which could be translated in English as 'talkathon'. One discussed everything under the sun, gossiped, ate food, laughed and in general had a very good time. It was Subhash Ghosal, my friend from J.W.T., who told me what had gone wrong at the Ordnance Club apart from the whirring projector and the creaking floor. The general opinion was that the film suffered from 'longness'. For instance (he was transmitting someone else's opinion), what were those fleeting water insects and dragonflies doing there? What connection did they have with the story? I nodded sagely and said nothing. If this was to be the personal reaction of a sophisticated Bengali audience, what chance did the film have with the lay public?

I had to wait till 26 August for the answer.

Aurora Film Corporation, which was under contract to make newsreels for the Government of West Bengal, acquired the Bengali distribution of *Pather Panchali* as was usual. The film would open in a chain of theatres in the southern, central and northern parts of Calcutta.

Long before the opening, using my publicity experience, I had designed five billboards for the film which would be displayed in five different parts of the city. One of them was a full-sized eight foot by twenty foot one, at a site in Chowringhee in the heart of the city—it showed Apu and Durga running under a vast expanse of dark monsoon clouds. The only legend was the name *Pather Panchali*. This

billboard was talked about over the entire month or two before the film opened.

The opening in the theatre in the south was a gala affair, with the press invited along with our friends, relations, writers, critics and other film people.

The response was fantastic and dispelled from my mouth the bitter taste left by the première at the Ordnance Club. For the first time I tasted triumph, with unknown young people elbowing their way through the milling crowd to kiss the hem of my garment as it were. Mr Mathur, in a shameless somersault, came and gushed and shook me by the hand Doubtless he could see the government coffers filling up.

The première apart, the film did only moderately well in the first couple of weeks. The booking was for a fixed period of six weeks, since the theatre had booked with S.S. Vasan, a well-known South Indian producer of the De Mille type. His latest film was slated to open after the six-week run. From the third week the sale picked up quickly in all the three theatres, and soon the film was running to packed houses at every show.

As the six-week run ended, Aurora Film Corporation ran the film in another chain where it performed for seven more weeks. *Pather Panchali* was, in fact, a box office hit.

The day after the film was taken off after six weeks, I was awakened early in the morning by my servant who said that a gentleman had come to see me. I dressed hurriedly to come out to find a dhoti-clad man, obviously a South Indian, quite nondescript in appearance. He got up from the sofa to greet me. 'Mr Satyajit Ray?' he asked. I said 'Yes.'

'My name is S.S. Vasan. I am the director of *Insaniyat*.' I said I was honoured to meet such an important director, but what had brought him so early in the morning to see me?

'You,' said Mr Vasan. 'I had been to see your film last

night. If I had known that that was the film *Insaniyat* was going to replace, I would certainly have withheld my opening. You have made a great film, sir.' I was greatly touched. I offered him a cup of coffee, but he took his leave almost immediately after making his brief speech.

The newspaper notices ran out of adjectives praising the film. Later, the film was shown in other cities, always without subtitles (because we had run out of funds), in spite of which it drew the same kind of response.

My crew, my actors and myself were feted repeatedly in public and private functions including one at the Senate Hall, where the student community participated. At one of the screenings in Delhi, the film was seen by Marie Seton, who had come to India to give a lecture on the cinema and in particular on Eisenstein. She came to Calcutta from Delhi and looked me up. She not only liked the film but was anxious to do anything to advocate it and help me in connection with the Central Government, in case the film was facing any trouble for being so true a picture of unadulterated poverty. I said I had heard that some ministers had taken objection to the film on the ground that she mentioned. She immediately wrote a letter to the ministry praising the film and saying if it came to that it fully deserved to be shown abroad.

A few months later, Dr B.C. Roy, who had seen the film at a special screening and was greatly moved, asked me to arrange a screening for Pandit Nehru, who was shortly coming to Calcutta.

Nehru saw the film at the Lighthouse miniature theatre with two aides, Dr Roy and me doing occasional bits of translation. He too, was moved by the film. When the

question came up of entering the film at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956, Nehru was quick to silence all opposition to the film's participation.

Representing the films from the Indian side was an acquaintance of mine, Hiten Chowdhury, a Bengali film producer (of Bombay). Chowdhury, who was a great champion of the film, kept in touch with me from Cannes. For instance, I got a letter from him in which he wrote that the Indian Government was doing nothing to help the film, not even throwing a party as was customary.

The official Cannes showing took place on one of the holidays of the festival at midnight, following four other features, the fourth one being one of the new Kurosawa films which had not been well-received at the festival. Most of the jury members didn't turn up. Among the critics who did were my friend Lindsay Anderson, Lotte Eisner, André Bazin, Georges Sadoul and Gene Moskowitz. They all got together along with Jules Dassin who was one of the few members of the jury to have seen the film and urged and asked the festival committee to have another special screening when the jury would be present. This was arranged and the film went on to win the special jury prize for the Best Human Document, which was certainly better than being wholly overlooked. *Pather Panchali* went on to win a dozen prizes at home and festivals abroad, including a special award from Manila for Chunibala as Best Actress.

Chunibala had broken her hip in a fall shortly before the release of the film, and a special screening of a 16 mm print was arranged for her in her house. She died shortly after winning the award.

*

The success of *Pather Panchali* helped in a decision that had been forming in my mind for sometime—to give up advertising and take up film-making as a whole time profession. I took the decision with my wife's consent, as well as a tacit one from my mother, who had already started neatly pasting the reviews of *Pather Panchali* in a large red scrapbook.

But before giving up such a lucrative job, I had to find a story and a backer for my next film. The success of *Pather Panchali* held the assurance that making the next film would be comparatively easy. This was found true when Muralidhar Chatterjee, a producer, offered to guarantee five films in a row for us under his banner, M.P. Productions. Anil sat down with Chatterjee to discuss terms. But the negotiations fell through because Chatterjee wouldn't agree to the amount that Anil suggested the technicians should be paid.

I read one Bengali novel after another but found nothing that took my fancy. What does one do when one looks for a film story? It is a difficult question to answer. Sometimes, of course, it's the whole story that appears cinematic. At other times, it may be a character in a gang of characters or the interplay between them, or it may be a situation, perhaps just one situation, which seems strikingly original and interesting, around which a simple story may be built. In *Pather Panchali* I was attracted by more than one element—the two deaths, the monsoon shower, old auntie, the twin sides of Sarbajaya, cruel and loving, and so on. What led me finally to do another film about Apu was one single attitude of Apu in the second novel *Aparajito* which I read again after discarding a score of novels. The excerpt is dramatic in the book and goes as follows: After Sarbajaya's death Apu feels relief, a strange feeling. It was one of the

experiences in which there was an element of happiness. When the news first came by wire, he felt happy to be free of a bondage. But this lasted a very short while only, without his being aware of it, before being overtaken by grief and fear. What had happened to him? What did he want? Why, when his mother had devoted herself wholly to his well being, was she an obstacle in his path? How could he be so cruel, so heartless? Even so, he had to face the truth. He had loved his mother so much, yet the news of her death had made him feel light-headed for a split second—this was the truth and couldn't be wished away. Although this particular scene is not shown in the film, the idea of Apu growing up and away from his mother is very much there and much stress is laid on Sarbajaya's slow realization of the fact.

The material that to my mind could make a film would start in Benaras, with Harihar making a livelihood as a professional priest, while Apu is still a boy of only ten or so and end with the college student Apu, on his mother's death, leaving his uncle's house in the village and continuing his struggle for existence as an orphan. Apart from the story's deeply human intensity, I was drawn irresistibly to the idea of Benaras as a backdrop of the first half of the story. I had been to Benaras before and I knew there was quite frankly no other place more photogenic in the world. *Aparajito* too contained, like *Pather Panchali*, two deaths—Harihar's coming towards the middle and Sarbajaya's towards the end. Both were poignantly described by Bannerji. The treatment of death on the screen has always fascinated film makers and stretched their imagination to the limit, and I was no exception.

Before settling for *Aparajito*, I had read a story by a writer called Narendra Nath Mitra, which had attracted me

as a possible film subject. This I ultimately made in the early sixties as *Mahanagar* (The Big City). For the present I could think of no one to play the role of the retired schoolmaster father. I approached the doyen of stage actors, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, who had earlier sent for me after seeing *Pather Panchali* and said nice things about the film. When I made the offer to Bhaduri he laughed and said, 'Satyajit, you know as well as I do that in a film no one acts but the director himself, so why do you need me?' So the particular subject was kept in abeyance.

By now I had decided to make *Aparajito* as a full-time film maker. Nicholson bade me a fond farewell, and I said goodbye to all my colleagues in the studio.

Six

Picking Up The Threads

THE FINANCIAL SIDE of the second film didn't carry any of the problems that plagued *Pather Panchali*. A company called Epic Films, owned by, among others, the owner of a radio store, came to my rescue. The radio store owner was also an amateur actor of considerable talent and had given a small reception for us in his place at Dixon Lane after the success of *Pather Panchali*. He had become a genuine admirer of me and was anxious to make sure that I didn't suffer from a lack of funds as I did in my first film.

Aurora Film Corporation, which had distributed *Pather Panchali*, signed an agreement with Epic Films to distribute *Aparajito*. The budget this time was a little higher, one lakh six thousand rupees which provided remuneration for me as a script writer and director. Virtually the same crew would be used. Unfortunately, Shanti Chatterji, my first assistant in *Pather Panchali*, had become involved in another film, so we took three new people—all acquaintances of mine, one of whom, Sailen Dutt, had some previous experience of keeping continuity.

This time Mrs Bannerji, the author's widow, was paid in advance for the film rights. She was delighted that her trust in me had been justified. She only regretted that her husband wasn't alive to see how well his work fared on the screen.

The experience after the first film told me that it would be better to have a proper script ready. With that in view, I

bought a fat red cloth-bound book, the kind that is normally used to keep accounts, a practice going back several hundred years. They are called 'kheror khata' and they are meant to last.

I decided that the wisest thing would be to write at least the first half of the script in Benaras. At the same time we would scout locations and talk to the local people in case we needed any help from them. As for casting we already had Harihar and Sarbajaya, but we needed among other characters two Apus, one about ten and the other about sixteen. I was not prepared to have Subir Bannerji again as Apu, partly because he had proved difficult to handle and partly because he was too young. I decided to take care of the casting after my return from Benaras. In Benaras, while scouting locations and later, when shooting, I had kept a diary. Here is an extract written a couple of days after my arrival in Benaras (the 'ghats' referred to in the diary are the flight of steps that lead down to the river. There are scores of these in Benaras at regular intervals for over a couple of miles along the Ganga).

March 1, 1956

I set out at 5 a.m. to explore the ghats. Half an hour to sunrise, yet more light than one could have thought and more activity. The earliest bathers came about 4 a.m. I gather.

The pigeons are not about yet, but the wrestlers are. Incomparable atmosphere. One just wants to go on absorbing it being enchanted and invigorated by it. The thought of having to work, planning, picking up extras, setting up camera and microphones,

staging actions is worrying—but here if anywhere is the truly inspiring setting. It is not enough to say that the streets are wonderful, or exciting or unique, one must get down to analysing the reason for the ingeniousness and their impact. The more you probe, the more is revealed and the more you know what to include in your frame and what to leave out. In the afternoon, the same ghats present an utterly different aspect. Clusters of innumerable widows make white patches on the orangeish ochre of the broad steps. The bustle of the athletics is absent, and the texture is different . . . . The ghats face east. In the morning, they get the full frontal light of the sun and the feeling of movement is heightened by the play of east shadows. By 4 p.m. the sun is behind the tall buildings where shadows now reveal the opposite. Result: a different light until sunset, perfectly in tune with the subdued nature of the intensity. Morning scenes in the ghat must be shot in the morning and afternoon scenes in the afternoon.

March 2

Explored the houses in the Bengali tolla. Those of Ganesh mohulla are perhaps the more photogenic—what makes them so? The crosses in the lanes, the breaks in the facades of the houses, the patterns created by the doors, windows, railings over modern columns—here the light is quantitatively unvarying, so one could pass off a morning shot as an afternoon one.

We chat with the people in the neighbourhoods and they promise co-operation when needed . . . . We are in fact at the mercy of the residents there and must deal with them with utmost caution. The constant fanfare and the whole arduous enterprise must be worked out.

March 4

Visited the Durga Bari. People who come here with the intent of offering a prayer to the deity do it with half a mind, the other half being on the monkeys. These animals go about the place as if they owned it. Irresistibly funny, they go sometimes for your bag of peanuts with alarming liveliness. But when they swing from the bell ropes and perform an impromptu musical extravaganza, the sight and sound are no longer comic. Rich possibility of a scene here with Apu.

April 8

Worked on the script. The opening is a problem, always is. Long shots establishing locale are a cliché. But should one entirely dispense with them in a film that is laid in Benaras? The instinct to do so is strong. As in Pather Panchali, I think it helped in not having a very tight script. Working in these circumstances one must leave a lot of room for improvisation within the groundwork of a broad scheme which one must keep in one's head. There were two things about the script of Aparajito that gave me cause to ponder—one was the fact that two Apus were required, one for the first half and one for the second.

In David Lean's version of *Great Expectations* there were two Pips, but there was a big difference in age between the two, the first one being about eight and the second well above twenty. Also the elder Pip was on the screen for a much longer time. It was, therefore, possible for Lean to achieve a smooth transition. Here I had to contend with two Apus, the difference in age between whom was only five to six years. Unless there was a close physical resemblance, would the audience accept the change from one Apu to another? The ideal would be to find brothers, but that was too much to hope for. The second problem concerned a character who was in the book and was very popular with the readers. She was the young Calcutta girl Lila whom Apu meets and befriends, while studying in college. I had to decide if she was essential for the narrative, because Apu's classmate Anil is shown as a close friend of Apu and that called for at least a couple of longish scenes to establish the relationship between them. I had to ask myself what function Lila would have. The more I thought the more I felt that the script could do without her. Apu's attachment to the city which made him somewhat indifferent to his mother living alone in the village could be accounted for by his new and exciting urban environment, his newly acquired friend and his absorption in the task of earning a living in a printing press.

The first problem had to wait, it would depend on the similarity of actors for the two Apus. As for the second, I finally decided to retain Lila's character, primarily out of a need to fulfil the expectations of the readers of the book, and they were legion. As I realise more and more, this was a compromise. How I finally got rid of Lila is a story which will be told in its proper place.

We had decided to start shooting in Benaras at this point. I needed only the actors who were required for roles in the first part of the story. This consisted of Harihar, Sarbajaya, the boy Apu, Sarbajaya's uncle, Bhabataran, who offers her shelter when she is working as a cook in a rich household in Benaras after Harihar's death. We also needed someone to play the part of a Brahmin who strikes up an acquaintance with Harihar. We chose for the part a professional actor named Kali Bannerji, who looked exactly right for the part. We decided to use bit players from Benaras to save on the cost of transportation to and from Calcutta.

I had already found on my first trip to Benaras an old man to play Bhabataran. He was listening to a devotional song sung by a group of singers on the ghats. He seemed to have a very interesting face which I felt would be right for the part. I decided to make a direct approach. I, therefore, introduced myself as a film maker.

'Films?' he murmured.

'Bioscope,' I said.

'I have never seen one,' he said. 'Is it like a pala?'

'Pala' is a form of folk theatre where the plays are usually historical or mythological.

'Rather,' I said.

'I see.'

I now came to the point.

'I would very much like to offer you a part in a film I am making. Have you any experience in acting?'

'None, I left home years ago and came here to die. If you die in Benaras, you go straight to heaven.'

'But you don't seem anywhere near death yet. Would you like to act in my film? It's a simple part, all you have to do is learn a few lines of dialogue. You'll be working about

a month in all—less than that in fact, altogether about ten days. It will be a new experience for you, for which you'll be paid good money. There is nothing wrong in that, is there?'

'Nothing at all. When do you need me?'

'I'll let you know. Please give me your address. You'll be informed as soon as we get ready.'

'Very well.'

Just that. He didn't talk about money. He didn't ask what role he had to play. All I knew about him was that he was a Bengali with an East Bengal accent. For the boy Apu, it was the same story as with the Apu of *Pather Panchali*. This time we decided to stand outside schools at the time the boys came out after the classes were over. It proved of no avail. And then he turned up suddenly. Bansi and I had been to see a railway station which we needed for the second half of the film. As we were entering the platform, the train pulled up and a group of school boys filed into a compartment with their teacher. They had obviously gone on an outing. One of the boys caught both mine and Bansi's eyes. There was no doubt that he looked exactly right for the role and he was the right age too.

We soon arrived in Calcutta. The boys got off the train, while we tagged along behind our target. He broke away from the group and made for a waiting train. We followed him into it and sat down beside him. Till then the boy had paid no attention to us. I asked him his name.

'Pinaki,' he said, 'Pinaki Sen Gupta.'

'Do you go to the cinema?'

'Only to those to which my mother takes me.'

'Did your mother take you to see *Pather Panchali*?

'Yes.'

'Did you like it?'

'Very much.'

'If there was another film about Apu, would you like to play his role?'

'Yes, I would.'

'You think your mother would let you act?'

'I think so.'

'What about your father?'

'My father is dead.'

We took the boy's address and asked him to talk to his mother. We would call at his house in a day or two.

Pinaki was right. His mother, an extremely good looking young widow whom we met within a week, said she was very happy that we had chosen her son to play Apu in *Aparajito*. The news had already come out in the papers and she was aware of the project. We then told her that her son would be shooting in Benaras to start with and then in the studio in Calcutta. She said there would be no problem in managing his leave from school and that Pinaki's uncle would accompany him.

'Black leader', the local term for blank exposed negative, is needed in the last stage of editing. This can be bought in the market, but there are middlemen to supply them at a price. One can live on supplying black leader alone to various production companies. One such supplier was K.S. Pandey, who had supplied black leader for *Pather Panchali*. Pandey was from Benaras and still had members of his family living there. We suggested to Pandey that he come with us not only to help us with the shooting but also to play a bit part. Pandey agreed happily.

In *Pather Panchali* we had mainly used a Mitchell

camera, which was a giant instrument, and being heavy and cumbersome was more suited for studio work than location where it had to be carried on the shoulder of a coolie from shot to shot. For *Aparajito* Subrata suggested that we buy a German camera called Arriflex, which had just come into the market. Epic Films would pay for it now and Subrata would later reimburse and would own the camera himself. Arriflex was supposed to be a very versatile camera and was specially suited for outdoor work.

Epic agreed to the proposal and in time the camera arrived from Bombay with its components, including lenses and filters, as Subrata had ordered.

For sound we had a new recordist this time, Durgadas Mitra, and a new recording machine, which was a superior one to the Kinevox used in *Pather Panchali*.

A friend of Subrata's had a house in Benaras, where his elder brother often stayed. It was a three-storied house right on the river and was unoccupied for the better part of the year. Subrata arranged with his friend's elder brother, whose name was Mohan Mazumdar, to make it available to us for the duration of our shooting at no cost at all. Soon we set off for our first lap of shooting, our unit consisting of about forty people.

We occupied the ground and the first floor of Mazumdar's house. On the second floor was staying one of the most reputed screen writers of Bengal, Nripen Chatterji, who was writing a script on the fifteenth century Bengali saint Chaitanya, which Mazumdar was planning to produce. The shooting in Benaras would consist of all the scenes supposedly taking place there except the ones in Harihar's house, which Bansi was to build in the studio. These houses,

especially those in the Bengali neighbourhood in Bengali tolla, usually fall into a pattern. As you enter you find yourself in a curved courtyard, which is surrounded by rooms. The source of light is the sky above the courtyard. Subrata had planned to reproduce the overhead shadowless lighting effect by stretching a sheet of cloth above the studio-built courtyard and bouncing the light back from it. As it turned out, it worked so beautifully that it was impossible to tell that the shooting was done in the studio. This system of bounced lighting was used ten years later by Bergman's camera man Sven Nykvist, who claimed in *American Cinematographer* that he was its originator!

For a city as crowded as Benaras, the shooting went remarkably smoothly. The only snag seemed on days when we shot in the streets. The boys from the nearby Benaras Hindu University arrived in houseboats to watch the shooting from the river. Fortunately, they were probably disappointed by the very subdued nature of our work, as by the fact that there were no actresses in our cast. So their enthusiasm evaporated and we were able to include the river in our shots.

The serious problem which we didn't foresee at all was caused by the new Arriflex. It kept jamming in the middle of shots thereby proving quite costly and time consuming. Eventually, it was the sound recordist Durgadas who took the camera apart and discovered what was causing the jam.

As in *Pather Panchali* I had given considerable thought to the death scenes and came up with ideas which I thought would be effective. Pigeons are a prominent feature of the ghats. They live in crevices in the tall majestic old buildings that line the streets near the river. In the morning the pigeons are fed by some of the sadhus who stand on the octagonal stone platforms by the steps and call out to them, at which

they come flying down on to the platform to feed on the grain. Each platform would turn grey as the cooing birds covered them completely and pecked away. However, any loud sound, such as a dog's bark close by, would make the whole cluster take off, rising high in the sky and making two or three sweeps in perfect unison, before they swooped down on the platform again. This sudden taking off of a hundred or so pigeons, the sound made by the flapping of a hundred pairs of wings seemed very striking to me on my very first morning in Benaras and I was determined to find a place for it in my film. After much deliberation, I decided to use it at the time of Harihar's death. Harihar lay seriously ill, Sarbajaya had tended to him all night and had dozed off. At dawn, when Harihar suddenly opens his eyes and mumbles something, Sarbajaya bends over him to listen carefully and catches Harihar saying 'Ganga!' He is asking for a sip of holy water before he breathes his last. Sarbajaya immediately wakes up Apu and sends him to fetch water from the river in a brass pot. Apu brings the water, Sarbajaya lifts her husband's head with her left hand and pours a little water down his mouth. The next moment the dead Harihar's head drops back on the pillow and at that very instant comes the shot of the pigeons taking off and whirling into the dark sky. This is one of the most effective scenes of *Aparajito*, but shooting it was a near disaster, as my diary describes it:

At the ghats at 5 a.m. to shoot the pigeons—memorable fiasco. The shot was to be of the pigeons taking flight in a body from one of the octagonal platforms and maintaining enormous circular swoops in the sky, as is the way with them. We had a fairly potent looking bomb which was

meant to explode to set the pigeons flying. The camera was set up. Subir had the match to the fuse, when with barely half a minute to go, Nemai started making frantic and impromptu gestures—we could guess something was wrong and Subir made a valiant effort aimed at the bomb to keep it from exploding. The bomb went off, the pigeons performed nobly, but the camera didn't turn. And then we discovered that the button had not been connected to the battery. Luckily, after 3 or 4 swoops, the pigeons were back on the platform and with the second bomb (we had a few) we had our shot.

Viswanath temple in Benaras is a temple of Shiva and considered to be one of the holiest in India. Thousands of devotees flock for a sight of the legendary lingam and a prayer offered to the deity. In the evenings an extraordinary audio-visual spectacle takes place in the temple. The priests chant prayers in Sanskrit and cymbals and drums are played in accompaniment. The effect is awe-inspiring. I wanted not only to record the sound, but also to take a shot to insert it at a suitable point in the film. We made enquiries but were told that this ritual called 'arati' had never been filmed before. Pandey suggested that we see the mahant, or the person-in-charge of the temple, to take his permission. Let me go back to my diary:

> Called on the mahant, Laxminarayan of the Viswanath temple. . . . Pandey, our intermediary, was insistent that I shouldn't be reticent, but should 'project my personality', which he was sure would

clinch the deal. Two things stood in the way:

a) my lack of chaste Hindi, and the mahant's lack of any other language, and

b) the fact that the chairs we were given to sit upon had been designed for the maximum comfort of bugs.

It seemed that two more trips would be required before the mahant condescended to give a nod of that immobile head of his.

He did give us permission finally and we proceeded to record the arati. This is how my diary describes the experience:

> Pack up at 4 p.m. and proceed directly to the Viswanath Temple for the recording of arati.

Durgadas sets up the tape recorder in a house across the lawn opposite the temple. Monilal (assistant sound recordist) weaves his way through the milling crowd of devotees with mike and a ninety foot cable, which just reaches the southern part of the inner sanctum. Temple assistants get busy stumbling over a cordon to keep off crowd, who push and crane their necks to get a sight of the image which is now being decorated for the arati. We wait, acutely conscious of the audacious incongruity of the camera.

The time arrives. We hold our breath. In the deafening crescendo I can just hear myself shouting 'start' and 'cut'!

The arati goes on for an hour. The end finds me and my recordists exhausted. As we are about to pack

up, word arrives from the mahant that he would like to hear the sound we have recorded. Would we be good enough to have our equipment conveyed to his apartment and the sound played back to him? It takes half an hour to reach the mahant's place with the equipment, another half to instal it, and a full hour to play back and pack up. When we finally take leave of the great man, it is a quarter to eleven. He smiles his approval and I almost expect him to tip us!

On the whole, the Benaras shooting went well except for a mishap which occurred to me. One day, towards the end of our stay, I had a fall at the steps of the ghat and badly hurt my right knee. I limped for the few days that remained and immediately after my return sent for our doctor. The doctor examined my knee and diagnosed it as synovitis—water in the knee, in plain English. I had to be put in plaster. Work on the film was stopped, pending my recovery, although search for the adolescent Apu went on. In the two months that I was in bed, I read stories in search of a subject for my next film. There was no idea yet of making a trilogy.

Soon after my recovery, work started on the film again. There were a few things to be done before the actual shooting started. First, we had to find a cottage supposedly belonging to Uncle Bhabataran in a village where Sarbajaya and Apu come to stay after she quits her job of a cook to a rich household.

I had a hunch that there could be an interesting village not far from Boral. From Boral we had to take a right turn from the main road. This time I decided to explore an area that fell on the left side. One day, shortly after my recovery,

we went out in search of this source. We got out of the car at the mouth of the village (the rest of the road was not motorable) and started walking eastwards with me carrying a stick. Soon enough, we found that we had reached the end of the village.

Beyond the last cottage lay a half mile stretch of fallow land. It looked promising. It consisted of a compound wall with a door which led into a courtyard, with two cottages, one a kitchen and the other a thatched hut, with a verandah where the occupants stayed. Generally, people in the village are neither very aggressive nor very curious. We explained the reason for our coming while a man and a small boy stood by.

We suddenly heard the sound of a train. I limped out through the door, went round and stood looking through the open field. Soon a train appeared from the left, from behind a line of trees in the far distance. Now I noticed the telegraph poles, the train passed by filling the sky with black smoke, which slowly thinned and faded.

I felt a tingling of the senses, as I did on every occasion I happened upon a bright idea. This one was effulgent! This would be Bhabataran's house. In *Pather Panchali* Apu had heard the sound of the train but had not seen it because of mist in the evening and had only once, by chance, got a sight of an actual train. This time he would be seeing a train from his cottage and the train would be used as a motif in the film as the link between the village and Calcutta when Apu goes to college, leaving his mother behind to fret for him and wait for his return.

Outside the cottage where we stood watching the train was a huge tree with a gnarled trunk which, I felt, would come in useful. All that was needed was a door on the eastern wall

of the courtyard, so that Apu could stand at the door to watch the train. Anil soon started to have a talk with the inhabitants of the cottage to fix up things. It would very probably cost money, but it was unlikely to be beyond our means.

Bansi started building Harihar's Benaras residence in the studio, while we looked for a few other locations. Unlike *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* called for shooting in various sites. For instance, there was the room where Apu stays in Calcutta, the press where he worked, the college where he studied, the railway station where he arrived from the village for the first time, the school in the village from which Apu matriculated.

There was a fairly important part, that of Apu's headmaster in school, which had not been cast yet. All this we proceeded to do one after another.

The locations presented us with no problems, except for one scene which takes place on the day of Apu's arrival in Calcutta. His first sight of a big city had to be shown in an exciting manner. I visualized a direct cut from the milling station where he alights from the train, to his crossing a wide thoroughfare and taking shelter under a portico when it starts to drizzle. He would wait for the rain to stop, while people of various nationalities passed, a couple of Pushtu-speaking Afghans, a group of Chinese selling birds in cages, talking in their own language, and a few other pedestrians, speaking Hindi. For the thoroughfare we explored Harrison Road, which would be geographically right, because it was very near the railway station. But how did we go about finding Chinese and Afghan actors? Nowadays, there are professional extra suppliers, but in those days, there were none.

The Afghans in Calcutta live in a neighbourhood in the south of the city making their living by money-lending and

selling asafoetida, which Bengalis use in cooking. The Chinese would have to come from Chinatown. Calcutta has a huge Chinese population. Shoemakers, confectioners, countless restaurant owners and laundry owners. We, however, anticipated no difficulties in finding extras of either community. Money talked and would do so in this case too.

At this time, we had a spot of good luck. My sister-in-law brought word that a lady she knew had a fourteen-year-old son who would be worth considering for Apu. She herself hadn't seen him, but the mother was keen that I should go and have a look at her son. About half a dozen of us, including my wife and my sister-in-law turned up at the house of the lady who was called Ghosal. She was a comely woman, soft-spoken, a little deaf, though she was in her late thirties. While we took our seats in the well appointed sitting room, she sent for her son. The boy Smaran arrived and I could immediately see that the chapter would close if he consented to act. Had he ever done any acting at school, we asked—he hadn't. But would he consider acting in my film as the grown up Apu if I told him what to do and how? Smaran smiled shyly and said 'yes'.

Unmistakably a Brahmin boy, Smaran didn't actually resemble Pinaki, but I realised it was too much to expect physical resemblance when actors of this age were in such short supply. I was prepared to take a chance.

Harihar's house being ready, we started shooting in it. We had only one mishap which I was able to turn to my advantage. An idea had come to me during the time we were shooting in Benaras which is infested with monkeys of the rhesus type which is the most common in India. We decided to show a monkey in Harihar's courtyard, drinking water from a dripping tap.

Performing monkeys are common in all the big cities of India and we managed to get one for our shooting. The trainer gave his word that his monkey would drink from the tap as we wanted. The same scene involved Sarbajaya, who comes and shoos the monkey away, wanting to use the tap herself.

We prepared to shoot, the monkey was placed at the foot of the tap as under instruction from its trainer, drank the water when Sarbajaya arrived to do her bit. But, as soon as she stepped forward towards the monkey, the beast showed its teeth, stretched and made a lunge for her. Karuna gave a stifled scream and recoiled in abject terror throwing up her hands. I said 'cut' and instantly decided to retain this convincing bit of impromptu performance. I would show Harihar coming out of his room into the courtyard commenting on the hazards of life in Benaras. The monkey would now run away and Sarbajaya, recovering, would go on with her business at the tap. On watching the rushes we saw how effortless the scene turned out to be. We could also see that Subrata's system of bounced lighting had worked beautifully, and combined with Bansi's meticulous workmanship, it had succeeded in imparting a degree of realism I had rarely seen on the screen before.

We did find the Afghans and the Chinese extras later, which deserves to be described in some detail.

For the Chinese, we had to go to the heart of Chinatown on a day when it was raining hard. Like all provincial Chinatowns, Calcutta's too had a sinister aspect. A middleman had fixed up the extras and all we had to do was to take a look at them. The three of us got out of the taxi, walked through a narrow lane, turned right at a door and were ushered into a dark, dank room, reeking of something, which we surmised to be opium. We sat in narrow-backed chairs,

waiting for what seemed like hours. A woman, all too obviously a Madam, entered, greeted us, showing her yellowing teeth and then left. We waited another ten minutes or so and then the middleman appeared with the extras who spoke fluent Bengali. I had to ask them if they knew their own language, because they would have to converse with each other on their own. They grinned and said they could, they also informed me that they knew Hindi. Then I told them what they would have to do, and they nodded. Our man would come and pick them up on a certain day at a certain time. The rate had been fixed at Rs 10 per head for an hour's work.

The Afghans were not selected beforehand. We went to their haunt in the morning of the day of the shooting, hoping to bring three of them to the lot. All they had to do was, like the Chinese, converse with each other in their own tongue. They agreed after the terms had been discussed and three of them took their asafoetida bags and got into the taxi with us. We drove for a while and came to a turning when the car was brought to a halt suddenly. Of the two Afghans who sat in front, one opened the door and started muttering '*Piswat, piswat*!' (Count a fee, count a fee) and disappeared from sight. We arrived at last in the city with the other two, who, however, did everything as they were told. Needless to say, we had to wait for the rain, which did come as we were shooting at the height of monsoon. Little Pinaki Sen Gupta playing the boy Apu and Smaran Ghosal, playing the adolescent Apu, proved to be obedient performers, with no traces of self-conciousness. As the film progressed, both developed into fine actors and, at later stages, needed little direction.

But the finest performance in *Aparajito*, a really inspiring and altogether a great one, was given by Karuna

Bannerji who was now a formidable actress. Especially moving were the scenes involving her and the grown Apu, when she realises that she is losing hold on her son. This made her last scenes particularly poignant because of the absence of her son from her side. She had concealed the fact that she was ill when Apu had come home for his holidays, and taken her herbal medicine secretly.

On the evening of her death, she is seen to be seated, leaning against a tree outside ~~her~~ cottage, blankly gazing at the open field. A train passes, she barely reacts, knowing that her son is not in it. Then she slowly rises, picks up her mat and goes into the house. Next we see her seated alone in the verandah silently awaiting death, her face devoid of expression. Suddenly her eyes light up as she hears Apu calling, 'Ma!' She is, of course, hallucinating, but nevertheless in the belief that her son is actually back, she drags herself across the verandah, climbs down the steps and struggles towards the door, where she stands looking out. Instead of Apu she sees fireflies swirling around the trees by the pond.

One of the toughest technical problems we faced was when we decided to show fireflies. We were using Kodak's fastest black and white negative film, Trix. We photographed actual fireflies with the aperture wide open, but nothing came out. Fireflies emit a cold light which is far too weak to be photographed, and yet I was adamant. A way had to be found to circulate fireflies.

Finally we hit upon a plan which on paper seemed absurd, even hilarious—but in practice, it worked. We chose the toughest members of our crew, had them dressed up in black shirt and trousers and let each of them carry a flashlight bulb and a length of wire and a battery. The bulbs were held

aloft in their right hands while they illustrated the swirling movements of fireflies in a dance, alternately connecting and disconnecting the wire to the bulbs which made them go on and off.

The scene, fortunately, took place in the dark or we would have had everyone rolling on the floor. The effect on the screen though, was perfect, and we complimented ourselves on a brilliant piece of improvisation.

Meanwhile, what was happening to Apu's girl friend Lila? We had found the actress, an amateur one, the daughter of a friend of mine in the advertising business. She was called Aloka and was a gifted and good-looking girl. The first scene between Lila and Apu takes place in a bedroom in Lila's house, and we had chosen a room in the house of a family we knew. It was a big scene and we had rehearsed it, Aloka shaping very well indeed. I was about to set up the camera when word came that she had a visitor downstairs. She excused herself and went away.

We set up the camera and the microphone and waited for Aloka to reappear. She took all of ten minutes and came back looking flushed and flustered. She drew me aside and spoke in a whisper.

'Uncle Manik, something very serious has happened.'

'What is it?' I asked.

'The man I am going to marry is downstairs and objects to my appearing in a film.'

Aloka was then fourteen and there seemed to be no question of her marrying for at least another four years. I knew their family and I knew they were fairly conservative.

I said, 'May I go and talk to this man?'

'Please do.'

I went downstairs, while everybody waited. I found that

the man in question was quite a well-known film actor. He apologised but seemed to me quite adamant in his view.

'I am sorry, but there is no question of my fiancée acting in a film.'

I felt quite sick and called a halt. I could see there was no point in arguing with the young man, when the girl herself seemed unwilling to do so.

This should have taught me a lesson, but it didn't. We found another girl, who was quite pretty, about the same age as Aloka and with no suitors to come and throw a spanner in the works, but she spoke her lines in a way that jarred on the ears. I still shot a few scenes with her and Smaran under the world's largest banyan tree in the Botanical Gardens, looked at the rushes and decided to drop her and at the same time to drop the part. The film immediately fell into a suitable pattern. Lila had always stuck out like a sore thumb.

Seven

Troughs And Crests

APARAJITO OPENED IN the same three theatres as *Pather Panchali* in October 1956, eight months after we had started filming. This time there had not been the wild rush at the time of final editing, since we were working to an easy deadline. Just before the Calcutta opening, word came from Delhi that Nehru and the President, Rajendra Prasad, wanted to see the film. I flew to Delhi with a print on 11 October and the screening took place in the President's private projection theatre. Indira Gandhi was also there with other officials who filled the small hall. There was an interruption of about fifteen minutes when something went wrong with the projector. I went up anxiously to find out and to my relief it was a minor fault which was soon mended and the projection went on. At the end Nehru came and congratulated me and then he asked, 'What happens to Apu now?'

I hadn't realised that this question would be in the mind of subsequent viewers as well. All I could say was that I didn't have in mind a third film on Apu.

I had made it a practice to have a private screening for friends and relatives before the actual opening, and after my return from Delhi, the screening of *Aparajito* took place in the 900-seater New Empire. The reaction was very good.

The press screening also went down extremely well and the viewers finally admitted that *Pather Panchali* was not

just a flash in the pan, and that I had done it again. There was a big rush the first few weeks. Then sales began to drop and the film was taken off after seven weeks. I brooded. In fact the film's short run affected the entire crew and all our family members. What had gone wrong? I worked it out in my mind and came to the following conclusions.

The *trompe l'oeil* hadn't worked and people thought they were seeing two different films and two different Apus, when they would have preferred to see one. Also, I felt that people had found the relationship between the grown-up Apu and the mother excessively harsh. The mother-and-son relationships they were used to were painted in soft colours. How could a boy of fifteen be so unfeeling towards a widowed mother who had sacrificed her whole life for him? The truth was that the Bengali audiences were not ready for the kind of psychological relationship that *Aparajito* depicted. I had also had the feeling while watching the film with the audience that *Aparajito* had lapses. I justly ascribed this to Ravi Shankar, who had again done a rush job and hadn't provided me with music in a few scenes that called for it. The stretches of silence were oppressive where the scenes would have made a greater impact had there been music to support the images. Still I felt grateful to him for providing me with the music, for by this time he had become too popular to spare any time at all.

I racked my brains to think of what to do next. I didn't want to be branded as a difficult director. I have always held that a film has to be made with an audience in view and even the director depended on someone else to set off his inventive spark by providing him with the wherewithal. It was incumbent on him (the director) to try to make sure that the cost was covered; if no profit was made how could one ensure such a result?

As I've said before, while I was lying in plaster, I had read a great number of Bengali stories and works looking for a possible future subject. One of the stories I had read was considered an exceptional short story by one of our most forceful writers, Tarasankar Bannerji. The story is called *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room) and deals with a music loving zamindar who refuses to change with the times and thereby meets his comeuppance. This then was the subject I would take up next. Apart from a grim role for a character actor, it had abundant scope for dancing and music used legitimately. We had just such an actor in our industry, Chhabi Biswas, who was not only extremely gifted, but was also very popular with the Bengali audience.

I proceeded to write the script which refused to take a popular shape but ended up as a serious story of decaying feudalism, embellished with music for which I had some of the top classical singers and instrumentalists of our time. This meant that although I had planned to work within a formula which our audiences were used to, I was already in the script stage doing something quite different. This was, of course, happening without my realising it.

Finding the decaying nobleman's palace that we needed for the film had us scouring half of Bengal, until we found just what we were looking for, a place called Nimtita, which was a short journey by train from Calcutta. The Choudhurys, who owned the place, gave us a cordial welcome and we had no difficulty in persuading them to let us use the frontage of the house and the wide verandah on the first floor, which overlooked the river across which lay East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

Chhabi Biswas had, of course, agreed to play the part of the zamindar in the lead role and had started taking riding

lessons. Then, he suddenly informed me that he had been invited to Berlin along with a film in which he had appeared, which would be shown in the competition section. 'I have never been abroad and I don't know how long I'll be away for.'

I didn't like this development at all, but I didn't have the heart to say 'no' to Biswas. I decided to let him go. Once he left, I thought I'd take up another film, finish it and then resume *Jalsaghar*. I simply refused to sit idle and wait for his return.

Among the stories I had read was a comedy fantasy called *Paras Pather* (The Philosopher's Stone) by our greatest humourist Parashuram. It was the story of a bank clerk who happens upon a philosopher's stone and becomes rich by turning his metals into gold; then tiring of a life of luxury and the unease that goes with excessive wealth, he goes back to his lower middle-class existence.

Chhabi Biswas left and we proceeded to film for a new producer, called Lahiri (Promode) under his banner, L. B. Films International. For the bank clerk I chose Tulsi Chakravarty, who thus had his first opportunity in a career spanning forty-six years to play a really important role worthy of his talent. *Paras Pather* was finished very quickly and smoothly. But before the picture opened, *Aparajito* and I were invited to participate in the Venice Film Festival. The job of distributing *Aparajito* was entrusted to Santi Choudhury, a genuine film buff with a private source of income, who had returned from Glasgow recently where he had studied engineering. But coming to Calcutta, meeting me and seeing *Aparajito* had made him take a major decision to give up engineering and go into films instead, starting with the forming of a distribution company with *Aparajito* as its

first venture. Santi left for Rome with a print of the film to be subtitled in Italian. I followed him a couple of weeks later. The subtitling had been done and the two of us took the train to Venice.

I knew my friend Lindsay Anderson's documentary *Every Day Except Christmas* had been entered in competition in the short film category. Unfortunately, he wrote to say he was not in a position to come as he had a previous engagement elsewhere, but he said that there would be his friends Gene Moskowitz and Lotte Eisner, who were both admirers of *Pather Panchali*.

We stayed in a small hotel across the quay. The first thing I did was to find out what I was up against in this festival and what other films were in competition. The list was formidable and made my heart sink. What chance did we have against Kurosawa, Visconti, Zinnemann, Nicholas Ray and André Cayatte. Among the members of the jury were Penelope Houston, whom I knew very well.

The Palazzo where the screenings took place was a huge affair holding something like three thousand people. The screenings were a formal business and, much against my wish, I had to wear a white prince coat and black trousers.

Both Gene and Lotte became friends in no time at all. Gene was the critic of *Variety* while Lotte Eisner, although originally a German, had left Berlin at the time of the war and settled in Paris. She was well over sixty with a zest for life, and a true connoisseur of films.

My film was shown on the sixth or seventh day. Santi had done something which didn't help the film at all. He had supervised the subtitling and the titles flashed by so quickly that people had hardly any time to read them. Santi's plea was that 'he didn't want to spoil the visuals'. Nevertheless,

the audience broke into a spontaneous applause when the pigeons took off after Harihar's death, and there was applause at the end. We came out of the auditorium. Penelope rushed out to my side and whispered, 'I am not supposed to tell you, but your film was just beautiful!' Later on, I remembered an usherette telling another that she had seen a 'bello film Indiano'!

I didn't know what to think. I tried to compare my film with everything that was shown and found it wanting, although, to be quite frank, I was not greatly taken with the big name directors' work barring Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* where Macbeth's death alone, from arrows which pierce his back and make him look like a human porcupine, was a *tour de force*.

It was at the press conference the following morning, that I was asked whether I had a trilogy in mind. Surprisingly, I found myself saying 'yes'. Why I did so, I don't know to this day. Probably I thought it would sound impressive. But it was widely published, and now I found the idea stuck in my mind, although I didn't really know whether there was a third part in the rest of the novel *Aparajito*.

The day after my screening, the local papers gave lavish praise, one of them giving it the highest rating of five stars.

On the final day of the function, Santi and I sat drinking espresso in a cafe when an elderly European journalist came up to me, bent down and whispered into my ears in English, 'I can hear the lion's roar.' The Venice award was the Golden Lion of St. Mark which was displayed in the foyer of the Pallazo and on which we cast yearning glances.

The same evening the news was confirmed by a pretty young girl from the festival who came to give me instructions as to what I should do and when, since the proceedings were

to be in Italian. I could hardly believe what I heard, although Santi promptly kissed the girl on both cheeks.

On the stage, at the awards ceremony, sat Rene Clair, the President of the Jury, along with other festival officials. I took the Golden Lion for the best feature film and gave a three line speech and was followed by Visconti, who received the Lotus Lion for the Dostoevsky adaptation *White Nights*. In his speech, Visconti made snide remarks about *Aparajito* which to many appeared gratuitous and in bad taste. Besides the grand prize, *Aparajito* also won the critic's award and the Cinema Nouveau Award. That afternoon, lunch was given by *Cinema Nouveau*, a largely reputed leftist film journal.

I was given a dinner in my honour.

Arriving at Calcutta, I was overwhelmed by the reception from the great crowd that had gathered. It is amusing to note that the marble on which the Lion stood was so heavy that I had to pay extra baggage charges.

The reception at the airport was followed later by a civic reception by the Mayor.

My faith in myself, which was somewhat depleted by the future of the film at the box office in Calcutta, was restored after the Venice victory.

Paras Pather opened a month after my return and I was lavishly praised for it in the papers. There was no question that Tulsi Chakravarty gave a magnificent performance, but the audience didn't go for the film in a big way. The producer Lahiri was not able to recover his investment from the production. Once again a film of mine had strayed too far from the formula to be popular with the public.

By then Chhabi Biswas was back and we resumed work on *Jalsaghar*. I had certainly no intention of falling into a

groove. *Jalsaghar* was as different from my comedy as it was from the Apu films. It had only five characters (Pinki of *Aparajito* played a brief role as the zamindar's son). The cast consisted entirely of professionals. It was a new experience for me. The downfall of the zamindar was a majestic theme which inspired me to conceive a penultimate scene that was most moving in its symbolism. It takes place at the end of the last musical soirée in his music room. The zamindar goes on drinking till dawn. The candles in the chandeliers and wall lights begin to go out one by one and this drives the drunken zamindar to a state of abject panic. As each lamp goes out with a last flicker, he feels his own life coming to a close.

Chhabi Biswas gave a superb performance which was liked by all and sundry. The film won critical acclaim, drew full houses every day for the first five weeks, then died a natural death.

Because the cost was very low, the only expensive items being Biswas's fee and the lavish set of the music room which Bansi built with his usual panache in the studio, the loss was not heavy and was ultimately handsomely recovered.

After three consecutive failures at the box office, I badly needed a film which would not only make the critics happy, but the public as well. I remembered my claim at the press conference in Venice and went back to read *Aparajito* again.

Just one reading and I had found my subject. Why hadn't I thought of it before? This time we would be dealing with an adult Apu, living in the city. The very way Apu gets married was pure cinema. In Apu's time, love marriages were uncommon. The normal procedure in Hindu families was an arranged marriage, usually requiring the services of a professional matchmaker. More often than not, such marriages led to misery, led to the bride being used by the

husband as a means of perversion. But there were exceptions where the union acquired the characteristics of a love marriage, when the wife was not subservient to the husband, but an equal partner in the relationship.

In Apu's case, he goes to a village to attend the wedding of a friend's cousin. The cousin's bridegroom arrives and turns out to be of unsound mind. The marriage arranged by an astrologer to take place at an auspicious time, is about to be wrecked. A Hindu belief says that such an ill-fated bride can never be married again. A suitable bridegroom found at the last moment may save her from this fate. Apu, primarily out of sympathy for the bride, whom he hadn't seen yet, agrees to be the substitute groom. The marriage takes place and leads to several idyllic months until the wife dies in childbirth away in her parents' place.

Apu, sunk in profound grief, refuses to accept the child, holding it responsible for his wife's death, leaves Calcutta, wanders around the country aimlessly and is ultimately forced to take a job in a colliery in faraway Madhya Pradesh. Five years pass, Apu's friend seeks him out and requests him to take responsibility for his son. Apu reluctantly comes back to his father-in-law's place, finds the child, and is overwhelmed by filial affection. The child runs off with him, accepting him as a friend, though not as a father yet.

A perfect film story if there ever was one. I wrote the treatment fast and arranged with a new distributor, Chhayabani Pvt Ltd to produce the film under the banner of Satyajit Ray Productions, with all the money to be put up by them. Upon receiving the cut, I would get fifty per cent of the profit. The time was then the middle of 1958.

Eight

Apu Redivivus

WHILE I HAD used only professionals in both *Paras Pather* and *Jalsaghar*, I decided to go back to predominantly non-professional actors for *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), which is what I decided to call the third part. I particularly wanted new faces for Apu, his wife Aparna, his five-year-old son Kajal and his friend Pulu. For the rest, I didn't mind employing professionals. When I was looking for a character to play the adolescent Apu in *Aparajito*, among the young men who came to see me was Soumitra Chatterji, brought to me by my assistant production man, Nitai Dutta. Soumitra had the right look, but was too old for the adolescent Apu. He was then twenty and just out of college, so I had to send him away. This time I sent for him again and offered him the lead role. Soumitra was then a radio announcer but with an intense interest in acting. He had made a stage appearance in a small role in a production by the doyen of Bengal's stage, Sisir Bhaduri.

It was, however, not so easy to find Aparna. We put an ad in the papers asking for photographs of girls between the ages of fifteen and seventeen to play Apu's wife. More than a thousand replies came, but not one of these deserved to be called for an interview. Once again we were beginning to despair, then word came about a girl called Sharmila Tagore who had appeared in a dance recital for the Childrens' Little Theatre or C.L.T. as it was called. She was related to the poet

Tagore and was thought to be quite talented. We got in touch with the parents and asked them whether we could take a look at their daughter for a possible key role in a further episode of 'Apu'. We knew that Sharmila had a younger sister who had happened to be in the film which had taken Chhabi Biswas to Berlin. So we were hoping that the parents would agree in case we found she was right for the part.

The Tagores brought their daughter to our flat. She wore a little yellow frock, which made her look like she was in her early teens, which in fact she was. Dressed like that, it was difficult to imagine her as Apu's bride. Her shoulder-length hair was also not right for Aparna—and yet she had the right features. My wife all too plainly showed her disinterest, but something about the girl's eyes told me not to reject her outright. I called my wife and told her to dress the girl up in a simple striped cotton sari as is normally worn by a village maiden and to tie up her hair in a bun and then bring her back to the sitting room where I waited with the parents.

The magic worked! Dressed like that, she was Aparna to the finger tips. She herself behaved differently after the transformation took place. She was then only thirteen, but now looked about four years older. Would I show her how to act?—she asked. I said she had nothing to worry about.

Her son was played by the son of a friend of Soumitra. He was only four-and-a-half years old and I thought I could hardly expect him to give a good performance, but by now I had acquired some experience in handling children however small and difficult.

For Apu's friend, Pulu, I chose a non-actor with a pleasing personality, but who was physically as different from Apu as possible.

When writing the script, I had wanted Apu's one-room

flat in Calcutta to be right on the railway track. In both *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, the train was a poetic element. I knew the train would help bind the three films together.

We found such a home in Tallah in extreme north Calcutta. It had a small room on the roof which overlooked a series of railway tracks on which trains shunted back and forth. In other words, the train would be a constant, colourful and usual phenomenon. I told Bansi, my Art Director, to build the room in the studio because it involved quite a number of scenes taking place both at day and night.

We had had only a day's work with Apu on location in Tallah, when I received an invitation from the Robert Flaherty Foundation in Vermont, USA, to attend the Flaherty Seminar. Mrs Flaherty, the wife of the film maker, herself wrote saying how much she had admired *Pather Panchali* and how much she would like to have me attend the seminar. Meanwhile other things had taken place in the States. A distributor had been found for *Pather Panchali*, Edward Harrison, who decided to open the film during my stay in the States. The United States Information Service in Calcutta arranged for a grant for me to travel to both the East and the West Coast for a month. This was an opportunity I'd hate to miss, because it meant staying in Hollywood and showing my film there. I could suspend my work on *Apur Sansar* for a month and resume it after I returned.

I arrived in New York on a surprisingly hot day in September and was met by the distributor, Ed Harrison, at the airport. Ed turned out to be a genuine New Yorker who distributed only the films which he loved. These included *Rashomon*, *Ugetsu Monogatar*i and *Umberto D*. Now added to this list was my film, which would open shortly in New York.

I had been invited to stay in New York at the flat of a young Bengali friend of mine, Bidyut Sarkar, who was a journalist. He had also come to the airport to receive me. Saying goodbye to Harrison for the time being, I went to Bidyut's flat overlooking Central Park. He lived on the fifth floor, without a lift. I had to carry my heavy suitcase up the stairs—it didn't prove an easy task.

Ed's brother Jack was a fine connoisseur of the arts and I soon discovered that Ed depended greatly on his brother's advice on which films to accept for distribution. Through Ed and Jack I met some of the journalists who lived in New York. Paddy Chayefsky, Sydney Lumet and Elia Kazan. Kazan invited me over to dinner, where I met Lee Strasberg, the originator of the 'method' school of acting and his daughter Susan. Soon the opening day of *Pather Panchali* arrived. Fifth Avenue Playhouse was the name of the theatre. I arrived in the theatre with Ed in the evening. A show had just ended and the audience was streaming out. I saw many of them wiping their tears and blowing their noses. A black couple had come to an earlier show and had learnt that I would turn up later in the evening. They came over to me, clasped my hands and said they had waited for me just to tell me that my film was the best they'd ever seen. I was deeply touched.

Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* was then the most influential of the critics. It was said that what he said about a film could make or mar its dreams at the box office. On the day his review was to appear in the *New York Times*, Ed waited impatiently. When the paper arrived we were frankly dismayed that Crowther had damned the film saying it was so amateurish that it would hardly pass for a rough cut in Hollywood. Crowther, however, had second thoughts,

when he was attacked by individuals writing to the *Times* to say he had made a grievous mistake in destroying a masterpiece. In a second review, something with no precedent at all, he said he hadn't seen the film in the right frame of mind the first time and a second look had confirmed that it was indeed an exceptional piece of work.

The film went on to break the record for a long run at the 5th Avenue Playhouse, playing for thirty-six weeks and breaking the previous record held by *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari.*

The Vermont trip to the Flaherty's, Robert's widow Frances and her brother-in-law David, was most pleasant. Both Frances and David had already seen *Pather Panchali* and had the impression that I had used Flaherty's method of working in a village with actual villagers playing the part. I didn't find it easy to disabuse that notion.

The seminar consisted of a lecture and was attended by all who had responded to the invitation, and a look at all Flaherty's films. I was particularly impressed with *The Man of Aran* which I hadn't seen before. From Vermont back to New York and then on to Hollywood, a trip included in my grant. I was warmly felicitated by George Stevens and many others after a screening of *Pather Panchali* at the Screen Writers' Guild auditorium. I was introduced by a delightful man, strangely incongruous in Hollywood, an Irish performer. Later George and I got to be quite friendly, and it was he who took me to see Billy Wilder, an all time favourite of mine, shooting *Some Like it Hot.*

I returned from the States after a month to resume my work on *Apur Sansar.*

The shooting for *Apur Sansar* called for more locations than had been necessary for *Pather Panchali* or *Aparajito.*

There were stray locations in Calcutta where Apu lives and is seen in the beginning looking for a job. There were, as I've said, railway tracks, with the overbridge which he had already passed—Apu has to climb down from the bridge, walk along the tracks for a few hundred yards, then take a right turn to reach his place in a lower middle-class locality. There were rivers in the village where Apu gets married. I wanted it to be by a river, since we had dropped the idea in *Pather Panchali* and rivers are so common in Bengal. Apu's aimless wanderings after Aparna's death also takes him to diverse locations—a sea beach, a dense forest, a hill top and finally we had to find the place where Apu takes a job in a colliery. There was also the scene where Apu's friend Pulu tries to persuade him to return home and take responsibility for his son.

The problem of the Calcutta locations solved, we started looking for the rivers. We looked at many before we found Jalangi in the village Maheshgunj (where Apu gets married) after being told by a friend, whose ancestors were zamindars, that one of the family's buildings was still standing and would be able to house the crew and the actors. The location proved to be perfect for us. The river was just right, narrow and winding through yellow mustard flowers. Boats plied and I thought it would be a good idea for Apu and his friend to travel part of the distance by boat. It would make the journey from Calcutta to the village more interesting.

Besides the zamindar's house, which was quite a spacious two-storey building, the only other brick structure was a dilapidated indigo factory by the river. Indigo plantations were common in Bengal and Bihar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British planters formed a breed of their own. We decided that we would

convert this old building into the house where the marriage would take place. Only the front verandah and the compound were to be mended. The actual house would be built in the studio.

For the colliery background, we decided to go to a place called Chirimiri in Madhya Pradesh in central India where the Lahiris who had produced *Paras Pather* owned a huge colliery and were initially the builders of the township. But before taking a look at the location, we resumed our shooting in Calcutta, the first half being in Apu's room, supposedly on the roof of a lower middle-class dwelling by the railway tracks in North Calcutta.

The very first day's shooting called for Sharmila Tagore to arrive as a bride with Apu, from her parents' place. For Apu, the situation is an awkward one, because he had gone to attend a wedding, not to get married himself. He arrives in the afternoon, when the menfolk are away at work and the house is comparatively quiet, except for the sound of a sewing machine. Apu climbs up the stairs cautiously with Aparna, wearing her finery and her bridal crown, following him. In Apu's room, she is left alone for a few minutes while Apu goes downstairs to pay the hackney carriage. Alone, in a strange surrounding, tears well up in Aparna's eyes and she slowly lowers herself on to the window-sill and gives herself up to a fit of sobbing.

I had told Sharmila, as soon as she arrived in the studio—her first day—that she would be starting with her most difficult scene, so that all that followed would appear simple. She had listened, but said nothing. I had told my assistants before taking the shot that the sound of sobbing would have to be dubbed, as I would be shouting directions right through the shot.

There were no rehearsals. I shouted directions, urging Sharmila to sob to her heart's content once she had lost control of herself. This went on for a good couple of minutes. After sometime, when Sharmila was asked slowly to regain her composure, she did so with considerable conviction and then, as the script had it, she found herself looking out through a rent in the curtain, at a hovel down below, where a mother was playing with a giggling child.

Somehow, this image of happy mother and child gives her the strength to cope with the situation she finds herself in. She wipes her tears, gets up from the window-sill. Apu comes back. 'Are you missing your people?' he asks. She shakes her head smiling faintly.

In the scenes of marital life that follow, the challenge was to suggest intimacy without using any of the elements to which the western director had access—such as embracing, or kissing or intimacy in bed. Kissing was tabooed by Indian censorship. I did not think of this as a curb on an artist's freedom. To suggest intimacy through a kiss is an easy method. I found it a challenge to achieve the same end by other, more oblique means. A great deal could be done through looks alone. But there were other ways as well. Apu's room had been shown as a bachelor's room in the beginning of the film. Now there were two pillows on the bed instead of one. There were other changes as well, clean curtains hung from the windows, a small potted plant rested on a windowsill. It was no longer a bachelor's room—the touch of a woman's hand was apparent. The fact could be suggested through the camera. Apu wakes up in the morning to find a hairpin lying between the two pillows. Aparna is already up and busy with the household chores. From where he lies, Apu can see her through the door, lighting the oven.

He fixes his gaze on her. Aparna notices this. 'Haven't you seen your wife before?' she asks. Apu smiles and picks up the hairpin, twists it around glancing at it peacefully. He puts it down, reaches for his packet of cigarettes under his pillow, brings it out, opens it and finds a piece of paper inserted in it with a line scrawled in Aparna's hand: 'You promised not to smoke more than one after meals!' Apu shuts the packet and puts it back under the pillow.

Renoir, when I showed the film in Paris, commented on the fact that intimacy had been suggested without showing even a single embrace.

There is one death in *Apur Sansar*. Aparna dies at childbirth, but the event happens off screen. The news is brought to Apu by Aparna's younger brother. This was one of the high points of the film. I decided to build up the agonizing revelation through one of the happiest and most lyrical images in the film.

Apu is now a clerk in an office, where he has received a letter from Aparna. It has been burning a hole in his pocket. Towards the end of the day, he finds he can't wait any longer. He brings out the letter and starts reading it.

A naïve, touching letter, which is heard in Aparna's voice, of which he can read only one line when a fellow clerk interrupts him with a recital of a tale of woe involving his timid and obedient spouse.

On the way home, standing in a crowded tram, Apu brings out the letter and starts reading it again. The traffic noise gives way to Aparna's gentle, musical voice. But this time a fellow passenger peers over Apu's shoulder at the letter, forcing him to stop reading again.

He finishes reading the letter when he walks by the railway tracks which lie between the overbridge and his

lodgings. With Aparna's voice still ringing in his ears, Apu reaches his flat, is about to enter his room, when he notices her brother standing on the roof. Apu's smile vanishes. He steps across to his brother-in-law, who stares open mouthed at Apu, unable to speak. 'What is the matter?' asks Apu with great effort. Aparna's brother brings himself to convey the news, half a sentence sufficing to appraise Apu of the truth.

This is a situation which had me racking my brains for days. How does a young man react to a person bringing news of the death of someone who has brought bliss and happiness to his life and added a new dimension to the concept of home?

The more I thought, the more I felt that the only valid reaction, both psychologically and unintentionally effective, would be for Apu to take leave of his senses momentarily and turn his fury at the messenger and hit out at him. This would be followed by a draining of energy, staggering back to his room and throwing himself on the bed.

This is how I shot the film. Almost every Bengali critic criticized the slap as being uncharacteristic of a well-bred and essentially gentle young man like Apu. I am talking, of course, only of the Bengali critics.

The grief-stricken Apu lies in bed for days. A downstairs neighbour, a widow, brings him lunch on a plate and exhorts him to take a hold on himself. 'After all, you're a young man, you can marry ten times more if you want to.' She puts the plate down on a tin chair and leaves. A cat prowls around. I wanted the cat for a specific reason as I wanted it to spring up on the chair and start eating the food from the plate. Unfortunately, the cat had already been fed without my knowledge and could not be enticed to have anything to do with the food on the plate.

At one point, however, Apu rises from the bed. He hasn't

got over his grief. He stands leaning against the wall. The camera moves to the shaving mirror to show his blank look. Off screen is heard the screech of a train whistle. Apu reacts. The camera moves closer to his face. A new look has come to his eyes.

The screen now turns white. There is the sound of a rushing train and smoke rises from the bottom of the screen in what is now established as the sky. The camera moves back to show Apu in close up, obviously standing by the railway track.

The smoke approaches, then we see the engine. It thunders up. Apu, his face still a blank, slowly leans forward, preparing to throw himself before the train.

Suddenly, a screech is heard. It is the cry of a pig which has been run over by the train. Apu's spell is broken and with it his determination to take his own life.

This is where the first half of the film ends. I was quite pleased with it and was particularly happy to dispense with speech over a long passage.

*

With financial worries out of the way, we were able to stick to our schedule—yes, we had a cast iron schedule this time to a large extent. But there were unknown factors which hindered smooth progress of the work. One such factor has to be described in some detail, as it shows up a not so admirable aspect of Bengali character.

In the scene of the wedding party, which arrives with the bridegroom's palanquin with a brass band playing 'He's a jolly good fellow' we needed about fifty extras whom we

picked from Krishnanagar, a town not too far from the village where we were shooting almost all the scenes. Another town near Krishnanagar was Nabadwip, both towns being important for historical reasons.

On the day of shooting the wedding party scene, while we were setting up the shot, we suddenly found ourselves invaded by about a hundred young men. From the way they arrived, we could make out that they were from Nabadwip and they had come to protest against their being denied the chance to appear as extras. They came climbing up the embankment by the river, on which the camera had been placed on a trolley car and surrounded it and our entire crew.

The intruders were so aggressive that it appeared at one moment that a riot would break out. By the time we were able to pacify them by promises to use them in a later scene, we had lost the light we needed for the shot.

Another near calamity that was averted at the last moment involved the shooting of a scene in a small boat in which Apu and his friend Pulu are making their journey to the village. Apu has written a novel and has given Pulu the manuscript to read. Pulu reads, while Apu plays the flute.

In the boat were the two friends, the old oarsman, the cameraman Subrata, the sound recordist Durgadas, myself and my first assistant Sailen Dutt. It made a full load. We were all huddled together at the end of the boat, watching the two friends perform. The scene was going on well, when suddenly Sailen let out a cry. I said 'cut' and turned round to see what Sailen was staring at aghast.

A huge boat was approaching from behind and making straight for our small one. It was a narrow part of the river and the big boat, which was approaching at a great rate, would not be easily manoeuvrable.

For a moment we were at our wits' end and thought a collision was inevitable—after all, what chance had a small boat like ours against this giant. The boat came at what seemed like breakneck speed and we counted the seconds for the inevitable catastrophe, when Sailen with a daredevilry that I had no idea he was capable of, sprang to his feet, threw himself forward and proceeded to fend off the big boat with all his might. While he pushed the big boat with his hands, his feet pushed our boat away from the collision which was imminent. However this caused the distance between the two boats to widen, causing Sailen to lose his foothold. He was flung into the water along with his notebook which he had for keeping continuity. It was the narrowest escape from dire disaster that I had ever experienced . . . .

*

Persuaded by Pulu, who has gone and sought him out at the colliery, Apu returns to his father-in-law's house to take charge of his son. He finds his son Kajal asleep in his bedroom. Like walking, sleep on the screen, especially of a small child, can be very tricky. The eyes refuse to stay properly shut, and the breath to come out normally. I was taking no chances with the four-and-a-half year old boy and made him take a sedative. Apu comes, stands beside the bed looking down at his sleeping son. His face fills with compassion. The next shot shows Kajal waking up and finding a stranger standing beside his bed. We turned the camera on the boy and the assistant shook him by the leg. The boy woke up. It was the most convincing waking up that I have ever seen on screen.

In the next shot, Apu bends down to touch the boy's head, but Kajal is frightened at the sight of a stranger, climbs down from the bed and runs away.

There were no further hitches in the shooting. Ravi Shankar was not in a hurry this time, so the entire music was composed and beautiful scores were taken within a period of three full shifts.

Third time lucky. *Apur Sansar* went on to win the President's Gold Medal and the British Film Institute's Sutherland Trophy as the most original film of the year. We were acclaimed at home and abroad and it was a huge box office success.

Soumitra Chatterji went on to become the most sought after actor in Bengal, while Sharmila Tagore made an extremely successful career for herself in Bombay, although she returned to work for me in a number of my films.

Shortly before his death, India's greatest director, Satyajit Ray, was honoured with a special Oscar in recognition of his contribution to world cinema.

In **My Years with Apu**, Satyajit Ray relates the story behind the making of his first three films – the 'Apu Trilogy'. The last piece of prose written by Ray, this memoir covers the key aspects of his career: his decision to give up his lucrative job in advertising in order to make his first film, early setbacks, the chronic shortage of funds, the guidance and support of master directors like Jean Renoir, his innovative solution to problems never encountered before in the history of Indian film, and the triumphant reception of the films at home and abroad.

Moving and insightful, and as skilfully wrought as any of Ray's masterworks of the cinema, this book is a delight to read.

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